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MULCH, MYTH AND MAGIC

THE CURIOUS FOLKLORE OF THE VEGETABLE PLOT

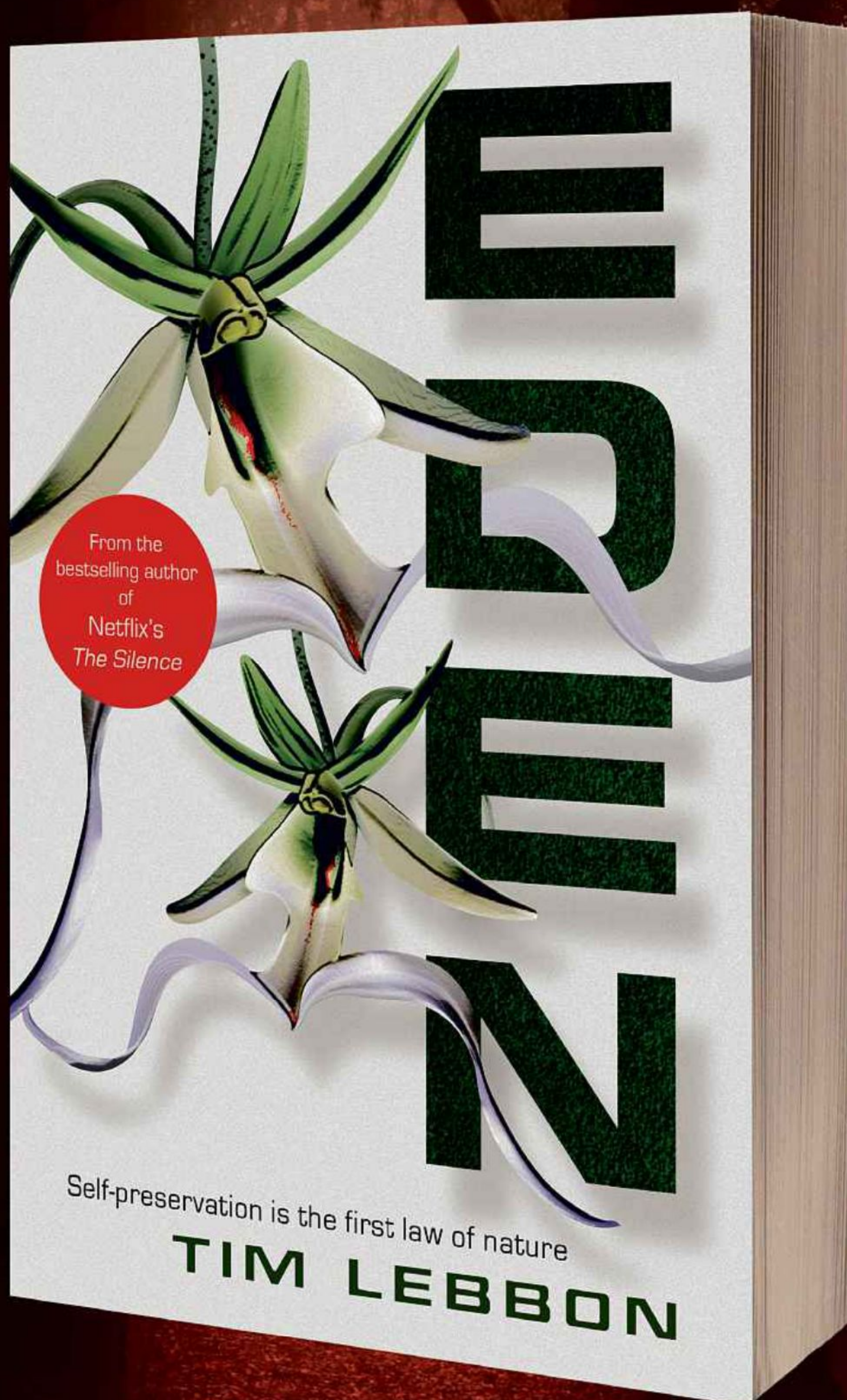
VIRUS FROM OUTER SPACE

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Josh Malerman, author of *Bird Box*



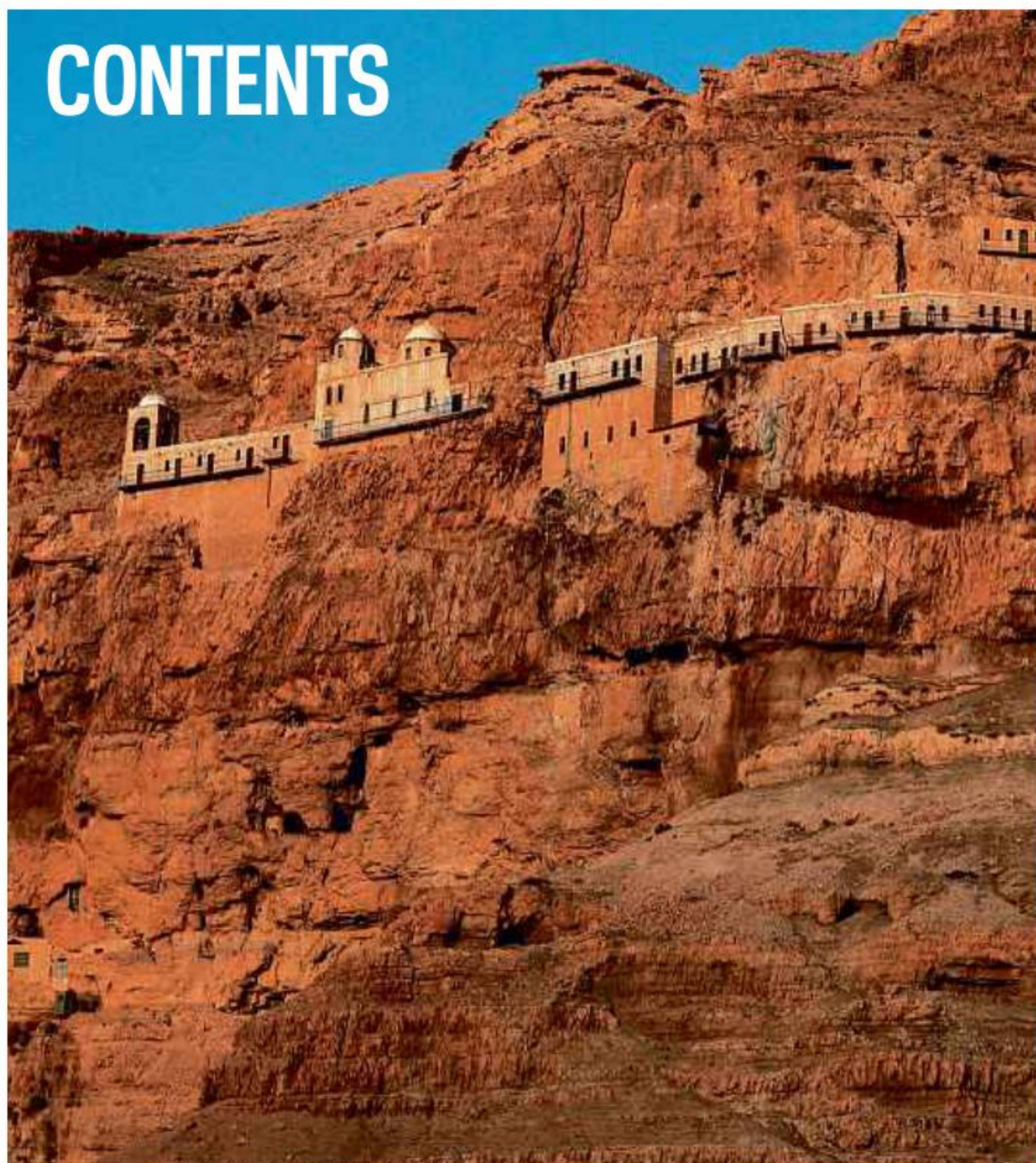
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FORTEAN TIMES is produced for Dennis Publishing by Wild Talents Ltd. Postal address: Fortean Times, PO BOX 71602, London E17 0QD.

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www.forteantimes.com / www.facebook.com/forteantimes



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PUBLISHED BY DENNIS PUBLISHING,
31-32 ALFRED PLACE, LONDON, WC1E 7DP

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PRINTED BY WILLIAM GIBBONS & SONS LTD

DISTRIBUTION

Distributed in UK, Ireland and worldwide
by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU. Tel: 02037879101.
Email: hello@marketforce.co.uk

Speciality store distribution by Worldwide Magazine Distribution Ltd, Tel: 0121 788 3112 Fax: 0121 788 1272

STANDARD SUBSCRIPTION RATES

12 issues: UK £48; Europe £58; Rest of world £68
US \$89.99 (\$161.98 for 24 issues)

Fortean Times, ISSN 0308-5899, is published every four weeks by Dennis Publishing Ltd, 31-32 Alfred Place, London, WC1E 7DP, United Kingdom. The US annual subscription price is \$89.99. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named WN Shipping USA, 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Jamaica, NY 114314, USA.

US Postmaster: Send address changes to: Fortean Times, WN Shipping USA, 156-15, 146th Avenue, 2nd Floor, Jamaica, NY 11434, USA. Subscription records are maintained at Dennis Publishing Ltd, 31-32 Alfred Place, London, WC1E 7DP, UK.
Air Business Ltd is acting as our mailing agent.

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ABC Member of the Audit Bureau of Circulations.
ABC 14,368 (Jan-Dec 2019)

Printed in the UK. ISSN: 0308 5899
© Fortean Times: APRIL 2020

EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

STRANGE NEW WORLD

As so many people have noted, within just the few weeks since our last issue, the impact of the Covid-19 virus around the world has left us feeling as if we're all living in some strange dystopian fiction: rising death tolls (75,000 worldwide at this point), countries in lockdown, deserted city streets, closed churches, field hospitals set up in parks, shortages of toilet paper, hand sanitiser or yeast, the Prime Minister in intensive care, websites where we are encouraged to snitch on our neighbours, bizarre conspiracy theories and fake news circulating on social media, and now even arson attacks on 5G phone masts suspected of somehow causing the coronavirus.

All we can really do under the circumstances is to carry on as usual, bringing you some of the more weirdly noteworthy virus-related news, but also providing some welcome respite from it. In our cover story (p36), David Clarke takes a closer look at Britain's 'witch marks', visiting Creswell Crags in Derbyshire and a number of other sites, many of them in the hands of the National Trust and all good places to visit when the current restrictions are lifted – whenever that may be. Given that such travel is currently out of the question, many readers will have found solace in their gardens, allotments or even balconies or windowsills. With this in mind, Lisa Gledhill (p52) reveals some of the fascinating folklore that has gathered around the cultivation of vegetables, from frankly improbable methods of testing soil temperature with one's naked buttocks to the depredations of the fabled Leek Slasher, an allotment bogeyman to strike terror into the hearts of growers. As we go to press, it's also the start of Holy Week, and in the first instalment of a two-part feature, *FT* founder Bob Rickard examines the way in which the Temptations of Christ can be interpreted in the light of 'paranatural' phenomena such as teleportation and levitation (p44).

As the cinemas are closed, Bob also picks his favourite Korean movies for you to track down and watch at home, while Rev Peter Laws makes a personal selection of viral viewing for those who'd like to spice their lockdown with topical terrors.

Most importantly, we'd like to thank all our contributors – some of whom are having to self-isolate – for their efforts under these difficult circumstances. And the same goes for our readers. The many kind and thoughtful messages of support we've received from you in recent days

have helped keep our spirits up. Getting your copy of *FT* each month seems to mean a lot to you, so we hope we can continue to provide some reassuring strangeness as we sail further into uncharted territory in the weeks and months ahead.

BUYING COPIES OF FORTEAN TIMES

We realise that getting hold of *FT* is not always easy in the current situation, so here is the most up-to-date information we have.

UK SHOPS

Many outlets that normally stock *FT* (including supermarkets like Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrisons and Asda) should be selling it as usual, while approximately half of WH Smith stores are expected to be open and should receive normal supplies. Keep an eye out when you are shopping for your essentials. If you are venturing out to try and find a copy of *FT*, please be sensible and safe!

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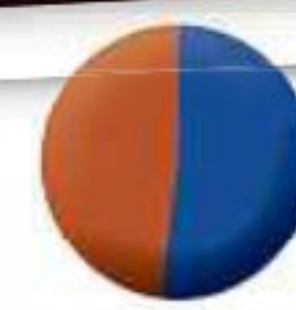
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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD STRANGE DAYS

COVID-19: LIFE UNDER LOCKDOWN

Coronavirus finds us in a new world of silent cities, virtual church services and resurgent wildlife

CONSPIRACY THEORIES

A viral Facebook post purportedly written by 'Scott W', a retired CIA agent, claimed the coronavirus pandemic was 'implemented' by world leaders as a scapegoat, designed to distract the world's population from a fast-approaching comet due to collide with Earth and cause the "death and extinction of every living organism we know to exist, a complete global annihilation from which there will be no survivors or Earth as we know it". This deadly comet was allegedly discovered in November 2019 by "NASA and the Vatican Observatory". Once scientists had established there to be no escape from the coming apocalypse, the UN decided to manufacture Covid-19 as a decoy in order to prevent mass panic, and, by forcing people to stay at home, enabling them to spend their final days and weeks with their families.

Rumours of a 'doomsday asteroid' have been around for several years, possibly since the 1997 NBC mini-series *Asteroid* and 1998's *Armageddon* film starring Bruce Willis, and this latest hoax story builds on these. Needless to say, scientists have found nothing to suggest Covid-19 is man-made; in its resemblance to SARS and MERS (which are known to have originated in bats), all the known evidence points to Covid-19 being a naturally occurring coronavirus that jumped from animals to humans. And the idea that world leaders acted in unison in response to an external threat is a sadly ironic one now, given the reality of individual governments having responded in different ways to the pandemic, with some



ABOVE: Normally bustling city streets have been left deserted, as in this picture of London's Trafalgar Square in late March.

countries having adopted strict quarantine laws, and others not. If indeed there was an imminent global catastrophe and the end of human civilisation, would Donald Trump be calling for the US workforce to return to work by April? *snopes.com*, 25 Mar 2020.

- One of the more rabid Covid-19 conspiracy theories hinges upon adrenochrome (featured in Hunter S Thompson's 1971 *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which it is described as a drug only obtainable from the body of a living human, being hormones from the adrenal gland and derived from human brain stems).

Adrenochrome is said to be the drug of choice for the 'liberal elite', who get their supplies from Hilary Clinton. She apparently manufactured the drug

by torturing children in a pizza shop (the infamous 'Pizzagate'). Tom Hanks, addicted to adrenochrome, caught Covid-19 from a tainted batch sourced via Celine Dion, a high priestess of the Church of Satan (she has also been lacing her children's clothing line with a chemical that makes children 'gender neutral'). In his Golden Globes acceptance speech, Tom Hanks signalled to the 'Hollywood Liberal Elite' that there would soon be a shortage of adrenochrome.

- Claims that the Covid-19 coronavirus is linked to China's biological warfare programme have been widely shared. The theory argues that Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory (NML) in Winnipeg had been analysing coronaviruses following the

SARS outbreak, to examine what the risks were to animals, and whether a vaccine could be developed. It is alleged that Chinese agents were working at NML, and that some samples of virulent viruses were sent from NML to China in March 2019. The suspicion is that Chinese bioscientists altered the genetic makeup of one of these viruses, and that it escaped from a Chinese lab. China's National Biosafety Laboratory (NBL) is located in Wuhan, 20 miles (32 km) away from the seafood market said to be the epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak. China's NBL has close ties to the military and their involvement in the development of biological weapons is suspected. *nationalpost.com*, 8 Aug 2019; *zerohedge.com*, 26 Jan 2020. (continued on page 6)



CEREBRAL SERENADE

Violinist plays while having brain surgery

PAGE 12



THE TROUBLE WITH DRONES

"Mechanical geese from Hell"

PAGE 14



FAREWELL, ROCKET MAN

'Mad' Mike Hughes finally falls to Earth

PAGE 30

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

NOEL ROONEY examines some unexpected side effects of the current pandemic, including a falling out among the alt-right and assassins armed with snotty tissues...

RUMOURS OF WAR

One of the hidden side effects of the coronavirus pandemic is the appearance of schisms in the alt-right Trump fan base. This novel form of social distancing is down to interpretations of the origins and purpose of the virus (there must be a purpose; there are no accidents or coincidences in the religiously oriented world of the alt-right): among the QAnon community, a whole range of theories has arisen, the most Q-ish of which is the idea that the whole thing is a cover for the Storm – finally Hillary and her Democrat baby-eaters will be arrested, and there will be no riots because everyone is indoors; for the more traditional, anti-communist right wing, however, this is the beginning of a war against an external foe – China.

The traditionalist patriots are slamming the QAnon crowd for not seeing the truth: about the virus and the terrible effects predicted for America; about the looming menace of China; and about the performance of the Donald, which many on the right see as tragically incompetent and inconsistent. A video popped up on quite a few conspiracy sites (including Rense, which was pro-Trump until quite recently) showing the Donald's erratic comments on the crisis laid over a calendar, thus making it clear he has no idea what he's saying or doing.

The Q people are sticking by Trump (not an easy task given how circuitous a route he is weaving through the crisis) and coming up with increasingly bizarre speculations on approaching comets and 5G technology. None of this, it has to be said, is coming directly from Q; there has been only one Q-drop on the coronavirus flap, which simply repeats Trump's unique nomenclature – the China virus. But QAnon is a juggernaut under its own steam now; Q's pronouncements are only a part of the bigger picture. In any case, given this is election year (assuming it doesn't, like the Olympics, get postponed) it is not good news for the President that

his support is divided just as his 'economic miracle' comes tumbling down in a fit of fever and coughing.

The cheerleaders for the war against China see things in stark terms. The virus (against all the scientific evidence to the contrary) is a bio-weapon, manufactured in China with technology and know-how stolen from the West (Chinese scientists working in the USA and Canada stole the plans; which rather begs the question of who started this whole thing). The virus is the opening phase in what will soon turn into a real, kinetic conflict, with millions of Chinese troops invading the USA when it is weakened and depopulated by the outbreak of Covid-19. Evidence for this impending threat includes the recent mobilisation of one million American troops; notwithstanding that all the personnel called up have medical skills and may just be on standby to help when hospitals are overwhelmed. The old story of FEMA stockpiling coffins has been dusted off too and updated to suit the coronavirus situation, an agglutinative gambit that grand narrative conspiracy theory often employs to freshen up fading memes.

Some conspiracists have taken this theory to uncanny lengths. Shepard Ambellas, a leading light on the conspiracy news site Intellihub, posted a video (since taken down) that purported to show the opening shots in the war. A young woman of east Asian appearance is seen to blow her nose in a tissue, then wipe the used item on the back of a park bench where a young white American male is sitting all unawares ('white American male', in alt-right speak, is of course a synonym, and symbol, for victim). The video is so obviously a spoof that you can practically hear the canned laughter, yet Ambellas takes it as evidence that the wicked Chinese are sending out teams of trained assassins, armed to the nose, to murder innocent Americans with second-hand snot. After such an insult, where else is there to go but full-scale war?

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

MOTHER OF WOMAN WHO BIT AIRLINE PILOT BLAMES HITLER

D.Telegraph, 6 Mar 2020.

Burglar steals car and flees after crash

Leamington Spa Courier, — Sept 2019.

JASON DONOVAN TACKLES NEIGHBOUR'S FIRE IN UNDERPANTS

BBC News, 2 Oct 2019.

Police urged to be transparent

Toronto Star, 11 Nov 2019.

BONGO BONKING REV DEFROCKED

Sun, 17 Nov 2019.

Axe throwing: 'It's cheaper than therapy'

Irish Times, 2 Jan 2020.

WORK STARTS ON NEXT PHASE OF PARADISE

Wolverhampton Express & Star, 16 Dec 2019.



STRANGE DAYS

(continued from page 4)

• The following theories have all appeared on online forums and social media in recent weeks.

The pandemic is a false flag designed to force universities to adopt online learning management systems which will end traditional classroom teaching.

It is a cunning plan to further blur the line between work and leisure, having massively increased the numbers of people working from home. Employers will continue to implement work-from-home after the pandemic has ceased, with sophisticated surveillance systems in place to spy on workers, ostensibly to ensure we are not skiving.

Covid-19 will trigger the implementation of a Global Economic Security and Recovery Act so governments can more easily take taxpayers' hard-earned money.

China and Iran attempted to pre-emptively inoculate their own population before releasing the coronavirus to destabilise the rest of the world.

As the risk of death from Covid-19 is far greater for older people, and since men are at greater risk than women (for reasons yet to be determined), it follows that the virus was created by a feminist cult of witches as a way to kill old white men.

While researching a SARS-like bat coronavirus in 2007, Wuhan's Institute of Virology was unhappy with the low rate at which it infected human cells. By genetically modifying it to give it an HIV outer shell they engineered the virus so that it could infect human cells more effectively. *thespinoff.co.nz*, 17 Mar 2020.

PREDICTIONS

Among other rumours and theories, one currently doing the rounds is an apparent prediction made in 2008 by self-styled prophet Sylvia Browne that a mysterious respiratory illness would spread all over the world "in around 2020". Her book, *End of Days*, has the following paragraph on page 312: "...a severe pneumonia-like illness... attacking the lungs and the bronchial tubes and resisting all known treatments. Almost more baffling than the illness itself will be the fact that it will suddenly vanish



ABOVE LEFT: Not all online church services have gone according to plan. ABOVE RIGHT: What was Murcia's dinosaur man up to?

as quickly as it arrived, attack again 10 years later, and then disappear completely." Browne's 'prophecy' is not so unusual when seen in the context of the SARS outbreak which preceded the publication of her book. Novelist Dean R Koontz is also said to have 'predicted' Covid-19 in his 1981 book *The Eyes of Darkness*, where he wrote about a biological weapon called Wuhan-400. In fact, his fictional bioweapon is different from Covid-19 in several key respects; his creation is 100 per cent fatal, and has an extremely fast incubation period. *snopes.com*, 4 Mar 2020.

FAKE NEWS

On Friday, 20 March, online stories incorrectly asserted that within 48-72 hours President Trump would evoke the 'Stafford Act', instigating a two-week mandatory quarantine period and National Guard mobilisation to impose martial law on the USA. Needless to say, he didn't.

A six-minute video shared on social media showed how to use a blow dryer to propel hot air into the sinuses, which, it was claimed, would kill the coronavirus. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued a statement that hand dryers cannot kill Covid-19, noting that the virus can still be transmitted in hot and humid climates.

Another video in circulation claims University of Queensland scientists have proven that bananas, as a source of vitamin B-6, bolster the immune system, thus helping to prevent coronavirus

infection and illness. The video was in fact a composite of two clips, one covering the university's research into a potential Covid-19 vaccine, with another from the *Wall Street Journal* also looking at vaccine research: images of bananas, together with text outlining the health benefits of bananas was then overlaid. The claim apparently began in the Philippines in March, after officials claimed that bananas could kill the virus.

Gargling with warm water mixed with salt or vinegar was another home-cure circulated widely on social media. It was suggested that the coronavirus could survive in the throat for four days but that drinking a lot of water and gargling the mixture would eliminate it. "There is no evidence for coronavirus or other respiratory viruses that drinking water or gargling protect against subsequent infection and illness," said Dr Robert Legare Atmar, infectious disease expert at the Baylor College of Medicine. "In fact, doing these activities might give people a false sense of security, which would be dangerous if it resulted in behaviour that is more risky." *campaignlive.co.uk*, 19 Feb; *techcrunch.com*, 19 Mar; *apnews.com*, 21 Mar; *socialmediatoday.com*, 26 Mar 2020.

KOREAN CULT CONNECTION

A secretive South Korean cult-like religious group is thought to have played an involuntary role in the spread of coronavirus in South Korea. A few weeks ago, the country had 400 infections,

with 200 of these linked to the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. At the start of March, officials identified 'Patient 31', a 61-year-old church member designated a 'super-spreader' who may have come into contact with hundreds of devotees. Shincheonji Church is known for its mass prayer and worship sessions that take place inside packed auditoriums and halls. Tests at the time revealed startlingly high infection rates among church members, comprising 60 per cent of the country's cases. At the time of writing, South Korea has around 10,000 infected persons.

Shincheonji Church was viewed with suspicion even before the pandemic, but there have now been calls for Church leaders to be charged with homicide. Its leader and 'Messiah', 88-year-old Lee Man-Hee, appeared on television in an apparent display of contrition. Nevertheless, he remained defiant, claiming that Shincheonji had been scapegoated for the government's early mismanagement of the crisis. Public hostility and anger at Shincheonji increased when it was reported that Church members had refused to be tested and had instead gone into hiding.

The Church teaches 'End Times' theology, claiming that the spirit of Jesus Christ descended into Man-Hee and that when the Day of Judgement comes, he will rescue 144,000 of his followers and take them to Heaven (the 144,000 figure being in accordance with the Book of Revelation). It focuses its



recruitment drives on university students in their early 20s. Initially, they are softened up with friendly Bible study classes and choir practice, but once recruited, they are subjected to a gruelling programme of lessons six days a week, are told what to wear, and are discouraged from forming relationships or from continuing existing ones. They must also attend the rally-like mass prayer events and recruit more followers. *S.Telegraph*, 23 Feb; *ft.com*, 3 Mar 2020.

CHURCHES IN LOCKDOWN

Amid the uncertainty and fear surrounding the coronavirus pandemic, some are turning to religion, although throughout much of Europe and the USA, church services have ceased and churches themselves have been closed as a preventative measure.

- A Washington DC priest has begun offering drive-through confessions after public Masses were suspended to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Father Scott Holmer of St Edward the Confessor Parish in Bowie, Maryland, holds confession in the church car park. “That little car becomes the little confessional seat,” he said. *thetablet.org*, 19 Mar 2020.

- With churches closed, vicars and priests are employing modern technology, recording and live-streaming themselves as they conduct services. However, during one such broadcast, a hapless minister accidentally set himself alight live on camera. Rev Stephen Beach of St Budeaux Parish Church in Plymouth, Devon, was preparing his online Sunday service featuring five lit candles arranged on a cross in the background. Leaning in too close to one of the candles, Rev Beach’s blue jumper burst into flame as he was speaking. “Oh dear, I’ve just caught fire,” he said, while patting out the flames. Fortunately, he was unhurt, although he did later say that his favourite sermon jumper had been damaged. A video of the incident posted online has been watched over 3,400 times.



ABOVE: The goats shall inherit the Earth – or at least the streets of Llandudno, which have been invaded by a 120-strong herd.

- In Italy, people have also been attending ‘virtual services’. Paolo Longo, parish priest of the Church of San Pietro and San Benedetto di Polla in Salerno province was streaming a service using Facebook Live, but failed to notice that the AR filter setting was switched to ‘on’. Viewers were treated to the sight of Fr Longo lifting cartoon weights, wearing dark glasses, assorted headgear, and adorned with bunny ears or a long beard. Embracing his inadvertent comedy capers, he later posted, “Even a laugh is good.” *S.Telegraph*, 22 Mar; *independent*, 24 Mar; *news18.com*, 25 Mar 2020.

NATURE RETURNS

Just as the skies over many Chinese cities are reportedly clear and smog-free for the first time in years, with industrial production and its attendant pollution temporarily halted, residents of Venice have reported seeing dolphins, swans and fish in the city’s canals. The usually crowded city has been devoid of visitors owing to the pandemic which has struck Italy particularly badly; at the time of writing, the country’s Covid-19 death toll had surpassed that of China. One resident posted photos of dolphins swimming in Venice’s canals on

social media, writing: “Venice hasn’t seen clear canal water in a very long time. Dolphins showing up too. Nature just hit the reset button on us.” The city has also recorded reduced air pollution since early January. European Space Agency footage also shows a drop in nitrogen dioxide in Italy over the past two months, which coincides with the nationwide lockdown.

Meanwhile, the usually busy seaside town of Llandudno in North Wales has been invaded by an estimated 120 mountain goats, after quarantine measures left the streets deserted. The herd of wild Kashmiri goats normally live on rocky land in Great Orme Country Park and were given to Major General Sir Savage Mostyn by Queen Victoria from the Windsor herd. The Royal Welsh Regiment includes a goat in its ranks, not as a mascot, but as a soldier. The current Regimental Goat is Fusilier Shenkin IV, recruited from Great Orme park. *standard.co.uk*, 18 Mar 2020.

WALKING THE DINOSAUR

Spanish police urged citizens to remain indoors during the state of emergency after they encountered one individual on the street dressed as a dinosaur. At the time of writing, Covid-19 had claimed

the lives of 340 Spanish people, and there were fears that Spain would follow Italy in terms of the virus’s catastrophic impact. Free movement – other than for the purposes of travelling to work, or to obtain food or medication – was forbidden. One exception was that pets may be taken for short walks; but police, who posted an image of the incident on social media, noted that dinosaurs do not fall into the ‘pet’ category: “During state of alarm, walking of pets is allowed if accompanied by one person, always short walks so they can relieve themselves. Having a Tyrannosaurus rex is not covered. #stayathome.” Law enforcement officials did not provide further details of why the citizen in the dinosaur outfit had been roaming Murcia’s streets during the curfew.

Also in Spain, police caught a man pretending to walk his dog by using a toy on a leash in a foolhardy attempt to beat the quarantine laws. He was spotted by police in the city of Palencia and ordered to return home; he was lucky to escape without being fined. Spain’s state of emergency means that anyone violating the government’s decree is subject to a fine between 600 and 30,000 euros. *newsweek.com*, 17 Mar; *dailymail.co.uk*, 18 Mar 2020.

SIDELINES...

DETROIT SLIME

A green liquid found oozing onto Interstate 696 in the Detroit suburb of Madison Heights caused authorities to block off portions of the highway and call in federal agencies to investigate. It was later established that the mysterious liquid was hexavalent chromium (aka chromium-6), featured in the film *Erin Brockovich*. Usually produced during industrial processes like plating, it is known to cause cancer and damage many organs. It was leaking from the basement of a local business. *edition.cnn.com*, 22 Dec 2019.

HANGOVER MUSEUM

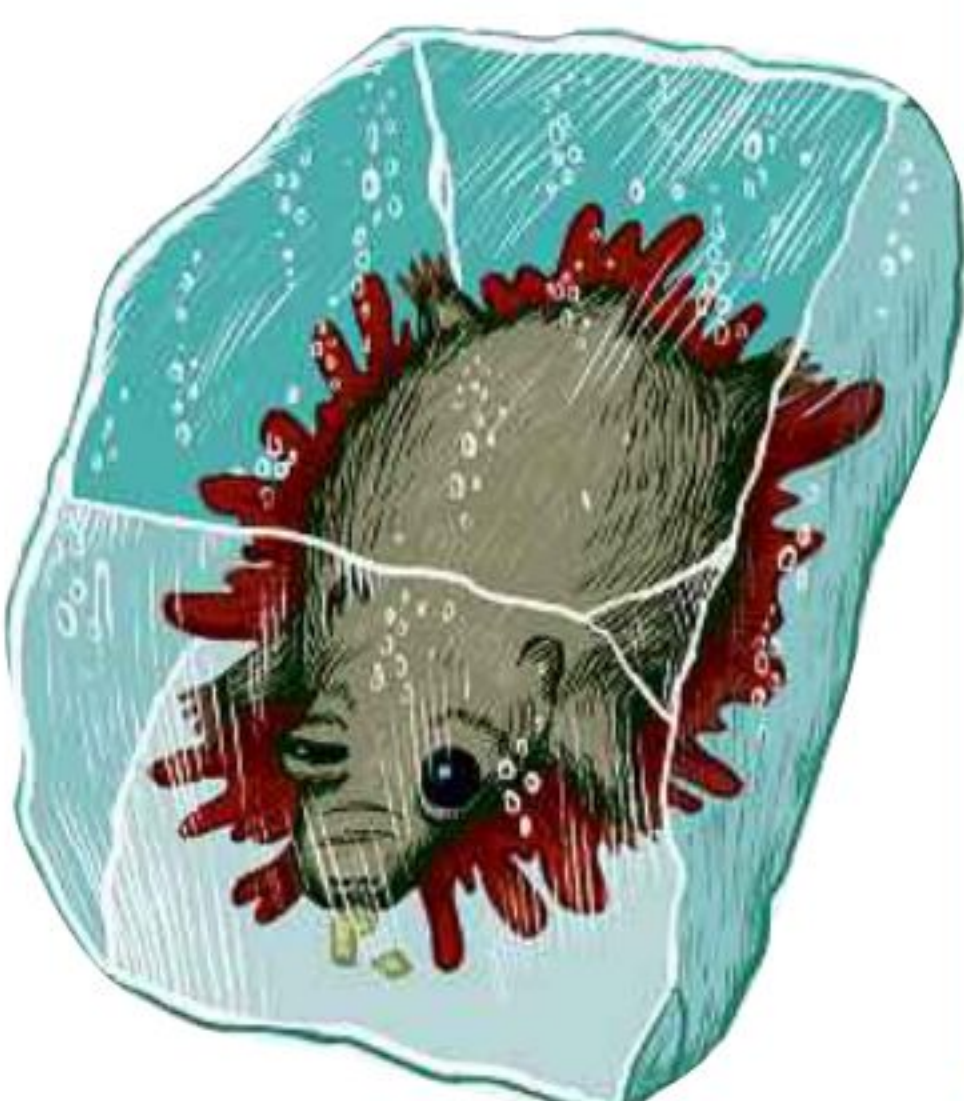
Croatia's latest tourist attraction is the Museum of the Hangover, which opened in December 2019. It features a collection of unusual items that people found after a night of heavy drinking, a 'beer goggles' reflex-testing room, and an interactive area where visitors can share their own hangover experiences. *[upi]* 26 Dec 2019.

HOSTILE CHICKEN

Police in Elizabethtown, Kentucky, were called out to a local pharmacy where a "hostile chicken" was "menacing patrons". As they attempted to detain the bird, officers were "pecked viciously" but eventually captured it using a milk crate. *wkvt.com*, 28 Dec 2019.

FROZEN LEMMING

A school student has found the world's oldest lemming in Siberian permafrost. The remains of the Ice Age herbivore, a Siberian brown lemming 6.5in (16cm) long, were under a river cliff. It had broken thigh bones and is thought to have fallen to its death. It was radiocarbon dated to more than 41,300 years old. *metro.co.uk*, 28 Dec 2019.



MARTIN ROSS

CULT CAPTIVES | Disturbing cases of cult members held prisoner, child abuse and ritual murder



JOHAN ORDONEZ / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Members of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish Lev Tahor sect photographed in Guatemala in 2016. **FACING PAGE:** The grave where the bodies of a pregnant woman, five of her children and a 17-year-old girl were found in Altos del Tiron, Panama.

JERUSALEM CULT

Further to two recent stories from the Netherlands and California of families being held captive in cult-like conditions (FT386:4, 389:16-17), news from Israel emerged in January of a self-described rabbi arrested on suspicion of running a cult. Aharon Ramati, 60, was accused of having enslaved and sexually abused dozens of women and children at the Be'er Miriam compound for several years. Eight women accused of abetting him were also arrested. Be'er Miriam is situated in Jerusalem's Bukharim quarter, an area with many Haredi (strict Orthodox) Jewish residents. Police say Be'er Miriam operated under the guise of a women's religious community but that "what happened at the seminary was not Torah-learning".

Ramati was arrested in 2015 for similar crimes, but was freed after women living at Be'er Miriam testified to his good character. Earlier this year, however, several women who had studied at the compound went to the police to report dozens of women and children living there in cramped conditions. A picture began to emerge of around 50 women whose lives

It is nicknamed the 'Jewish Taliban' for its austere doctrine

were completely controlled. "They had to ask [Ramati] for permission for everything and consult him over every simple action," said the police official, who explained at a court hearing how "the girls learned to obey the cult leader. They invited women to Shabbat meals. The rabbi knows how to talk to women. Slowly they scared them and separated them from their families. Part of the money that came from the girls was used to buy a car for the cult leader."

Coercion and punishments were used to compel alleged victims to remain at the compound, Ramati's eight female deputies playing an active role. "They humiliated them," the court heard. "One of them would regularly put their fingers in the fire to 'simulate hell'." In another case, one of the female suspects forced a hot pepper into the mouth of a victim. It was also reported that

children, some under the age of five, had been held in isolation and treated roughly, with evidence that at least one child had been beaten by Ramati. Commenting on the case, former Israeli MP Dr Aliza Lavi pointed out that Israel has no specific anti-cult legislation. *haaretz.com*, 13 Jan; *timesofisrael.com*, 14 Jan; *israelnationalnews.com*, 13 Jan, 5 Feb 2020.

'JEWISH TALIBAN'

In July 2017, the Israeli press carried reports of the death by drowning in Mexico of Shlomo Heilbrans, leader of ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect Lev Tahor. Nicknamed the 'Jewish Taliban' on account of its austere religious doctrine and the burqa-style black robes worn by its women, Lev Tahor was founded by Heilbrans in Israel in the 1980s. He relocated to the US with his followers in the early 1990s, where he served a prison sentence for kidnapping a 13-year-old boy sent to live with him in preparation for his bar mitzvah. Subsequently deported back to Israel, Heilbrans moved to Canada where he claimed political asylum due to his anti-Zionist beliefs.

A 14-year-old boy told reporters of physical and sexual



abuse he had endured within Lev Tahor (which means 'pure heart'), claiming that he and other children were regularly undressed, beaten and kicked, even alleging that a member of the group had killed a baby and another man. The boy said he had been living in the cult for over 12 years. The group, comprising around 40 families, fled to Guatemala, and later Mexico, after Canadian authorities launched an investigation into its activities. This followed claims from relatives that members were being drugged and abused, and underage girls were regularly married off to older men. Lev Tahor is also accused of kidnapping individuals by removing them from their family homes. Millions of dollars were said to have flowed through the group's bank accounts to the benefit of its leadership while ordinary members lived in poverty. *haaretz.com*, 14 July 2017.

CUPBOARD TEEN

In Germany, police found a teenager missing for more than two years in a cupboard inside the home of a 44-year-old man. The boy, 15, was found in the town of Recklinghausen, 100km (62m) north of Cologne, in December 2019, and was taken to a clinic for psychological evaluation. Police officers had been searching the man's apartment for images of serious child abuse; he was suspected of distributing child pornography. The man was arrested, and data drives seized by police, after using a dog specially trained to sniff out hard drives. The police statement said there was evidence the boy had been in the apartment for a long time.

In 2017, the boy had been living in a care home, but disappeared one day after saying goodbye to a carer. He was reported missing, with an appeal made on television, but nothing further was heard from him until two years later. After being reunited with her son, his mother said she had barely recognised him and that he looked like a "broken old man", wearing the same clothes he had on him the day he had disappeared. He told her he had

been a captive for two and a half years and not allowed to go outside. *BBC News*, 23 Dec 2019.

BEHIND THE WALL

A Colorado woman was arrested on suspicion of child abuse after 26 children were found behind a false wall at her children's day-care centre. Carla Faith, 58, was arrested in Colorado Springs on suspicion of two counts of reckless child abuse without injury, possession of a controlled substance, and trying to influence a public servant. Three employees, Katelonne Nelson, 31, Christina Swauger, 35, and Valerie Fresquez, 24, were also arrested on related charges.

Police had gone to Play Mountain Place on 13 November 2019 after receiving complaints that the centre was housing more children than its license permitted. Play Mountain Place is authorised to care for six children. Officers found Faith at a home on the property, and after hearing noises downstairs, they discovered a false wall in the basement, behind which were two adults and the children, all under three years old, some with soiled or wet diapers. Earlier that day, Faith had told an official that no children were at the facility, despite a mother reporting she had left her child there. Faith also told police there was no basement and that the children were away at a park. Colorado's Department of Human Services has suspended her licence, having already ordered her in November to close three other Colorado Springs daycare facilities. *[AP]* 26 Dec 2019.



EXORCISM DEATHS

The bodies of five children aged one to 11, their pregnant mother, 32, and a 17-year-old girl, all members of the Ngabé Buglé indigenous group, were found in the Panama jungle in January. They were members of an evangelical Christian 'New Light of God' group, and had been tortured, beaten, burned and hacked with machetes in a bizarre ritual supposedly to make them 'repent their sins'. Ten members of the group were arrested and 14 others, who had been tied up and beaten, were released. The area is so remote that helicopters had to be used to transport the injured to hospitals. The Ngabé Buglé are Panama's largest indigenous group, and suffer from high rates of poverty and illiteracy. The 'New Light of God' sect is thought to have been operating in the area for only three months. Apparently one of the church members had received a message from God saying that everyone must repent their sins or die.

After being alerted by three villagers who had escaped to go to a hospital and have their injuries treated, officials set out to investigate the remote community near the Caribbean coast. There, inside an improvised church they found a naked woman, machetes, knives and a ritually sacrificed goat. A mile away was a freshly dug grave containing the seven bodies. One of the suspects arrested for the killings is the grandfather of the dead children. *BBC News*, 17 Jan; *theguardian.com*, 16 Jan 2020.

SIDELINES...

TROUBLE AND STRIFE

A West Virginia man fired a handgun through a table because his wife was not listening to him. His wife told police he had put the handgun to his head after firing it at the glass table one foot (30cm) away from where she was sitting. Lonnie Smith, 55, told police that his wife was on the phone and he wanted to get her attention. *wsaz.com*, 26 Dec 2019.

PARROT WANTS OUT

When Lake Worth Beach residents heard spine-chilling cries and the words "Let me out!" they dialled 911. Florida law enforcement officers attending the scene discovered the cries to be those of a 40-year-old parrot named Rambo. The bird's owner explained that he had taught Rambo to scream "Let me out!" as a boy, when the parrot lived in a cage. *[AP]*, *apnews.com*, 5 Jan 2020.

PSYCHIC NICKED

A Barnsley-based psychic medium and ghost hunter was fined £100 after being caught driving while using an iPhone. Mark Smith, 35, was arrested by South Yorkshire police as he hosted an online interactive session for his YouTube channel dedicated to paranormal phenomena. *S.Mirror*, 22 Dec 2019.

BELLAMY BESTED

When a local radio station ran a contest asking listeners to phone in with their impersonations of TV botanist David Bellamy's distinctive accent, Bellamy himself rang in – and lost. *D.Telegraph*, 12 Dec 2019.

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

A baby snatched from a Chicago hospital 55 years ago has finally been located. Paul Fronczak was found living in rural Michigan under another name. He had been taken by a woman posing as a maternity nurse in April 1964. *E.Standard*, 20 Dec 2019.

BOOTY SHOOTER

A three-year-old boy shot his sleeping father in the buttocks with a small-calibre handgun he had found in their Pennsylvania home. The dad was treated at hospital for wounds not considered life-threatening. *[AP]* 20 Dec 2019



SIDELINES...

BINNED

Passers-by heard yells coming from a clothing donation bin in Paterson, New Jersey, and called police, who found a woman trapped inside. She had been in the bin for three days after someone had pushed her in and closed the door, causing her to get stuck. *D.Mirror*, 11 Jan 2020.

HOT SH*T

A heatwave in summer 2019 saw a pile of manure in Spain spontaneously combust, starting a 10,000-acre fire. *D.Mail* 30 Nov 2019.

A FINE VINTAGE

An *Antiques Roadshow* expert accidentally drank 180-year-old urine, rusty nails and a human hair, mistaking the liquid for vintage port in a 2016 episode of the BBC series. Inserting a syringe in the bottle's cork, he then drank some of the "very brown" liquid, remarking: "I think it's port – or red wine... or it's full of rusty old nails and that's rust". Evidently he was unfamiliar with witch bottles. *independent.co.uk*, 30 Dec 2019.

GULL WEAPON

A man has denied wielding a seagull in a fight with a café customer. Paul Elcombe, 26, allegedly threw the bird at Kyle Towers at Goodbody's cafe in Plymouth on 12 May 2019. Mr Elcombe appeared at the city's crown court to deny wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. No plea was entered to another charge of attempting to injure a wild bird. *BBC News*, 6 Jan 2020.



MARTIN ROSS

RESURRECTIONS |

Prayer power proves insufficient – can Russian cryogenicists help?



ALEXEY SAZONOV / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: Head of Russian cryonics firm KrioRus Danila Medvedev (left) and a customer look inside a low-temperature human brain storage unit.

PRAYER POWER

A US megachurch launched an appeal to raise money for the family of a two-year-old girl who died suddenly, and at the same time attempted to bring the child back to life through the power of prayer. Olive Heilighenthal died on 14 December 2019. Her mother, Kalley, is a singer at the Bethel Church in Redding, California. The church follows the Charismatic tradition that believes God can intervene in the material world.

In an Instagram post, Kalley wrote: "We're asking for prayer. We believe in a Jesus who died and conclusively defeated every grave, holding the keys to resurrection power. We need it for our little Olive, who stopped breathing yesterday and has been pronounced dead by doctors. We are asking for bold, unified prayers from the global church to stand with us in belief that He will raise this little girl back to life".

Church spokesman Aaron Tesauro said: "We believe that with God, nothing is impossible, even things like resurrection". Bethel congregants have previously turned to prayer power in attempts to cure illnesses, and the church runs a "Dead Raising Team", founded by a graduate of the School of Supernatural Ministry. Volunteer groups tag along with first responders and pray for deceased people, hoping they will return to life. According to their website, they have "brought about 15

resurrections amidst the 60 teams worldwide". Two weeks later, the church conceded that efforts to resurrect Olive had been unsuccessful, and it conducted her funeral service on 31 December. A GoFundMe page had raised around \$72,000 (£55,400) for the family. *newsweek.com*, 20 Dec 2019.

WAITING IN VAIN

Residents of Nakhon Nayok City, Thailand, notified police that there was a "strong rotting odour" coming from a neighbouring house. Upon investigation, a rotting human body was found on the floor inside the dwelling together with three women, who had been hired to care for the dead man, 62-year-old Sorrawut Dechtawee. One of the three women, Puttan Sodmanee, explained to police that Sorrawut had died naturally 10 days before, but after studying the Bible they firmly believed he would be resurrected, and were waiting for him to come back to life. *nationalthailand.com*, 17 Dec 2019. For the most recent roundup of successful resurrections, see **FT386:20-21**.

FROZEN FAMILIES

A Kansas City woman was arrested after her husband's corpse was discovered in a freezer in their bedroom. Barbara Watters, 67, was charged with abandonment of a corpse, a felony punishable by up to four years' imprisonment. Police were tipped off after a witness told them the corpse

had been in the freezer since December 2018. The suspect is said to have unspecified "mental disorders".

Elsewhere, A Russian company, KrioRus, is offering a service whereby the brains and/or bodies of recently deceased relatives are preserved in deep freeze conditions in the expectation that one day scientists will be able to revive them. Bodies float, *Matrix*-like, in several metre-tall vats filled with liquid nitrogen at temperatures of -196°C (-320.8°F). Potential clients from nearly 20 countries have signed up for the procedure, known as cryonics. The cost for whole-body storage is £27,600 while for a mere £11,500, customers can get the brain iced and preserved. An average Russian's monthly salary is £580. Prices are slightly higher for non-Russians.

Critics say that cryonics is pseudoscientific, in that there is currently no extant technology or medical procedure capable of reviving a corpse, with no guarantee that one will be developed in the future. Evgeny Alexandrov, head of the Russian Academy of Science's Pseudoscience Commission, described cryonics as "an exclusively commercial undertaking that does not have any scientific basis."

One customer, Alexei Voronenkov, has paid £30,000 to have his 70-year-old mother's brain frozen. "I did this because we were very close and think it is the only chance for us to meet in the future," he said, adding that when he dies he intends to undergo the procedure himself. Perhaps a declining belief in the Christian Church's doctrine of the life eternal and the resurrection of the body is a factor in the service's growing popularity.

(Sydney) *D.Telegraph*, 16 Nov 2019; <i>, 18 Jan 2020.



SAINTS & GURUS

Rogue Swami starts his own country, plus Manchester's potential saint



ABOVE: Police escort controversial Hindu Godman Swami Nithyananda following a court appearance in 2012.

FUGITIVE GODMAN

An Indian guru wanted in his homeland for sexual assault and child abduction has announced plans to establish a new country, the Republic of Kailaasa (named for Tibet's sacred Mount Kailash). It was initially thought to have been located on an island off the Ecuador coast, to be purchased by some of his wealthy followers. Swami Nithyananda, 41, a self-styled Hindu 'godman', was arrested in 2010 and later charged with the rape of a disciple and of abducting children to collect donations for his ashram, after which he is thought to have fled India, entering Ecuador in 2018, where he applied for refugee status. When this request was turned down, he made for Haiti.

Nithyananda has an avid following in southern India, including film stars and politicians, and has claimed to be able to delay the sunrise, see through walls, observe events taking place far from his physical location, communicate with cows in Tamil and Sanskrit, and to have cured 82 children of blindness by "opening their third eye". He says the new "cosmic country", dedicated to the "preservation, restoration and revival of an enlightened culture and civilisation based on

authentic Hinduism", will have free healthcare, fight global warming, and promote gender equality and vegetarianism. All Hindus are eligible to apply for citizenship. There are around 80 micronations like Kailaasa, self-proclaiming entities claiming to be independent and sovereign states but which are not recognised by other countries or by the UN. *D.Telegraph*, 6 Dec; *i*, 7 Dec; *Guardian*, 6, 10 Dec 2019.

MOTHER TERESA OF MANCHESTER

The life of a Victorian nun, Elizabeth Prout, is to be scrutinised by Vatican clerics to assess whether she is suitable for canonisation. Known as the 'Mother Teresa of Manchester', she opened a chain of schools and homes for poor children and destitute women across the industrialised north west of England.

In 2008, her case for sainthood was submitted to Vatican clerics, who pronounced her as one who lived a life of 'heroic virtue'. The next step is the submission of a dossier on her life in hopes that Pope Francis will declare her 'venerable'. At that point, Church authorities must submit evidence of at least two miracles linked to her name, the

final stage before sainthood is granted.

Mother Elizabeth, who founded the Passionist Sisters order, has been described as practical, generous and self-sacrificing. Born in 1820 to an Anglican family, she converted to Catholicism in her early 20s, becoming a nun at 28 and being given a teaching post in some of the most deprived areas of Manchester. She started a religious community that met with criticism for its apparently revolutionary ideas, such as teaching nuns and other women to be self-supporting by earning their own wages. The community was approved by the Vatican in 1863, but Mother Elizabeth died of tuberculosis the following year at the age of 44. The diocese of Shrewsbury will commemorate the bicentenary of her birth this year with a pilgrimage. If successful, she will be the first English female saint since Margaret Clitherow, Anne Line and Margaret Ward, Catholic martyrs during the reign of Elizabeth I, who achieved sainthood in 1970. In 2019, Cardinal John Henry Newman, father of England's Roman Catholic revival was canonised by Pope Francis. *D.Mail*, 26 Dec 2019.

SIDELINES...

POLITICAL POISON

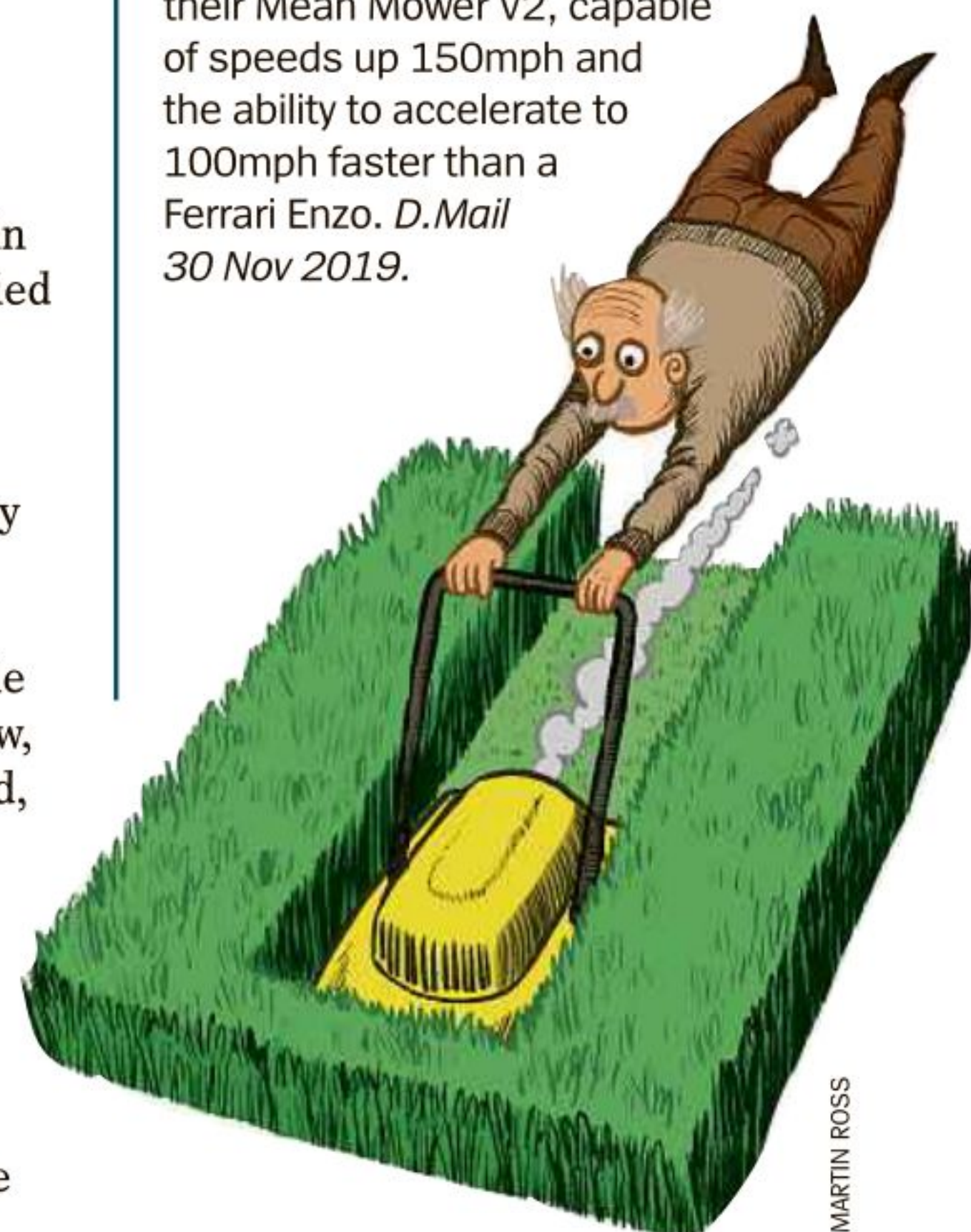
The already-fragile relations between Serbia and Kosovo were further soured by allegations of poisoned ballot papers in an October 2019 election. 26 members of Kosovo's election commission complained of a foul smell and of itchy skin after opening envelopes containing ballots cast in Serbia during Kosovo's parliamentary election. Twelve were hospitalised, and an investigation launched into the toxic voting slips. An expert from Pristina University Clinical Centre declared the ballots free from infectious diseases or chemical agents. *Irish Times*, 16 Oct 2019.

DIY BOMB

A woman was arrested for attempting to make a bomb inside a Walmart in Tampa, Florida. A security guard spotted her roaming the aisles and grabbing flammable materials, projectiles and matches from the shelves, accompanied by a child. "This woman had all the supplies she needed to cause mass destruction at her disposal," said Sheriff Chad Chronister. She was charged with attempted arson, fire bombing, contributing to the delinquency of a minor, child abuse and battery on a law enforcement officer. *boingboing.net*, 15 Jan 2020.

MIGHTY MOWER

Honda won the record for the world's fastest lawnmower with their Mean Mower V2, capable of speeds up 150mph and the ability to accelerate to 100mph faster than a Ferrari Enzo. *D.Mail* 30 Nov 2019.



MARTIN ROSS



SIDELINES...

CUSTODY BATTLE

Kansas man David Ostrom, 40, has asked a judge to let him engage in a sword fight with his ex-wife and her attorney so that he can “rend their souls” from their bodies. Arguing she had “destroyed (him) legally” with disputes over custody, visitation and property tax, Ostrom suggested the judge had the power to let the parties “resolve our disputes on the field of battle, legally”; he also requested 12 weeks in which to secure Japanese samurai swords. [AP] 14 Jan 2020.

METH-GATORS

Police in Loretto, Tennessee, issued a warning to residents not to flush drugs down the toilet, as the processed water is sent downstream to local creeks where ducks, geese and other birds are often seen. “We shudder to think what one all hyped up on meth would do,” the statement read. “Furthermore, if it made it far enough we could create meth-gators in ... the Tennessee River.” fox35orlando.com, 15 July 2019.

PHANTOM VEG FLINGER

Devon and Cornwall police are hunting the person or persons responsible for hurling large vegetables from an overhead bridge into the path of traffic. 17 incidents have been recorded since November 2019, involving swedes, mangelwurzel and turnips “the size of footballs”. The latest incident saw a swede flung at an armed response unit on its way to an emergency. A police statement warned that the “nut-case needs to be caught before there’s a tragedy.” D.Telegraph, 21 Jan 2020.

GRAFFITI'D BEAR

Footage taken in Arctic Russia of a polar bear with ‘T-34’ spray-painted on its side has alarmed experts, who warn the stunt could affect the animal’s ability to blend in with its surroundings and hunt. A scientist at the Institute of Biological Problems of the North said it was unlikely the bear had been painted without sedation, as “the characters are evenly written and are all the same size”. The T-34 tank played a vital role in the USSR’s victory in WWII. BBC News, 3 Dec 2019

FIDDLING WITH HER BRAIN | A surgical serenade...



KINGS COLLEGE HOSPITAL

ABOVE: Dagmar Turner played Gershwin to surgeons as they removed a brain tumour. BELOW: Back home, convalescing with Bach.

Professional violinist Dagmar Turner, 53, suffered a seizure while performing with her orchestra. Diagnosed with a brain tumour larger than a golf ball that proved unresponsive to radiotherapy, she was booked into London’s King’s College Hospital for surgery. Since the tumour was located in the right frontal lobe, near the area that controls hand movement and coordination, Ms Turner was fearful she might not be able to play again afterwards. Explaining her concerns to neurosurgeon Keyoumars Ashkan (himself a pianist with a music degree), he proposed an initial MRI brain scan to identify those areas of the brain critical to her violin



KATE GILLAM / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

the surgeons used a technique called ‘cortical mapping’, whereby brain tissue is stimulated millimetre by millimetre with a tiny electric probe. If she suddenly stopped playing or went out of tune, they knew that part of the brain was crucial to her musicianship. Ninety per cent of the 8cm by 4cm (3in by 1.5in) tumour was successfully removed, and Ms Turner was back home with her

family three days later.

“The violin is my passion. The thought of losing my ability to play was heart-breaking,” she said. “Prof Ashkan and the team at King’s went out of their way to plan the operation – even planning the position I needed to be in to play. Thanks to them I’m hoping to be back with my orchestra very soon.” D.Mail; Metro; Sun, 19 Feb 2020.

FORTEAN MURMURATIONS

On 30 December last year, a flock of starlings – some 70,000 strong – took to the skies above Potteric Carr Nature Reserve, South Yorkshire, where they assumed the shape of a classic Adamski-style flying saucer. They were captured by wildlife photographer Gerald Robinson, who described the spectacle as “magnificent... to see something like that is mind blowing. It’s something I’ll never forget.” PHOTO: GERALD ROBINSON / SWNS

In February, thousands of starlings flocked together over the sea in Brighton, East Sussex, looking remarkably like the Loch Ness Monster (below). The stunning murmuration was captured by amateur photographer and bird watcher Bill Brooks. *D.Mirror*, 6 Dec 2019. PHOTO: BILL BROOKS / SWNS





“Mechanical geese from Hell”

DAVID HAMBLING looks at recent drone scares and some of the unanswered questions they raise

The skies are filled with literally millions of drones. Chinese company DJI, which dominates the consumer market, has sold several million quadcopters since the launch of their original Phantom in 2013. These provide a simple explanation for any mysterious light in the sky. The problem is that drones are proving to be every bit as elusive as other types of UFO, and unlike previous sightings they demand to be taken seriously by the authorities.

Drones are hard to find. They are small and contain few metal parts, so they do not show up on radar as readily as other types of aircraft. In practice, special ‘counter unmanned air systems’ (CUAS) radars are needed, which typically have a range of only a few kilometres. Also, drones do not require an airfield or landing facilities, so it is impossible to stake out possible operating bases. And finally, because they are so cheap, its operator may choose simply to ditch a drone rather than risk flying it back to base, so even if the drone is located the operator may never be identified.

Authorities need to respond to drone sightings because there is the risk of a tangible reality behind them, one that is capable of doing damage. Studies have found that even a small drone presents a far more serious collision hazard to aircraft and helicopters than a bird: one writer described them as “mechanical geese from hell.” This is because some components, in particular batteries, are much harder and denser than anything inside a bird. Running into a bird at 200mph may be like hitting a pillow, whereas a drone is more like hitting a brick, with the potential to shatter a windscreen or shred a jet turbine.

Hence all the concern around Gatwick in December 2018. Drone sightings disrupted around 1,000 flights, which were diverted or cancelled, affecting some 140,000 passengers. There were repeated sightings of drones, but no physical or photographic evidence. The military were called in with special anti-drone equipment.

On 21 December, three days after the initial sighting, Gatwick was operating normally again. Two people were arrested and released without charge; a damaged drone was found near the airport, but this did not appear to have any connection with the scare. A police statement seemed to suggest that the whole thing might have been a false alarm, but this was soon retracted. “We can unequivocally state that there have been numerous illegal drone



A police statement seemed to suggest that the whole thing might have been a false alarm

sightings at the airport over three days from 19 to 21 December,” stated Deputy Chief Constable Jo Shiner on 24 December 2018. “There were numerous reports clustered around 37 occasions where a drone or drones were seen.”

A few weeks later, on 8 January 2019, flights were grounded at Heathrow airport due to a drone sighting, but again nothing resulted. Similar events have hit many other airports worldwide.

An even bigger wave of drone/UFO sightings occurred recently in and around Colorado (see **FT391:17**), with multiple reports of swarms of drones flying in formation at night, sometimes without lights. A task force of 15 federal and local law enforcement agencies – including the FBI and the US Air Force’s Office of Special Investigations – was set up to investigate. Since then, sightings have tailed off and no drones or operators have been identified.

While the Colorado Department of Public Safety concluded that there were no reports of criminal activity associated with the drones, they were being flown illegally. The American FAA imposes very strict rules on drones being flown at night, and such flights are not allowed without a special licence. Drone sightings in the area continue, but in much lower numbers. Several social media groups have sprung up, and some of these suggest that people are now reluctant to make official reports because of fears of ridicule or trolling. These fears are likely to

have been amplified by media reports, such as one in *Vice* magazine, that the drones may not even exist.

Experts I spoke to agreed that the background noise of random reports was likely to drown out real sightings. “People become hypersensitive after a scare. Everything with a flashing light will get reported as a mystery drone,” said Richard Gill, Founder & CEO of UK company Drone Defence Services. At both Colorado and Heathrow, passing aircraft were frequently identified as drones. To confuse matters further, aircraft and drones looking for the mystery drones were themselves identified as mystery drones.

Even if such an investigation turns up physical evidence, it may only complicate the mystery, because finding a drone does not tell you who has sent it or why. The Russian airbase at Khmeimim in Syria has suffered repeated attacks by numbers of drones since January 2018. These are garage-built devices resembling model aircraft, each carrying several grenade-sized bombs, with a range of something like 100km (60 miles). These drones could have been built by anyone; the Russians say their accurate targeting means the drones must have been sent with the aid of a foreign power, and at various times have pointed the finger at the US, Turkey and Ukraine.

Deniability has always been an important aspect of drone operations. When the *USS Boxer* downed a drone in July 2019, US authorities claimed the drone was Iranian. The Iranian government immediately said it was not one of theirs. Did the drone come from a rogue Iranian faction? Or a third party trying to stir up trouble between the US and Iran? Or was it, as the Iranians suggested, a case of friendly fire downing an American drone? Similar confusion obfuscates many other drone incidents in the Middle East.

Now they are so easily available, everyone is flying modified commercial drones. Criminal cartels use them for smuggling, government agencies for espionage, terrorists to prepare for or carry out attacks, activists to disrupt airports. Meanwhile they are used innocently by filmmakers, hobbyists and scientific researchers. Untangling which drones are which, and which sightings are even real, is going to be a challenge in the 21st century.

And if aliens really *did* want to covertly observe life on Earth, copying our drones would be an excellent way to do it.



ANIMAL NEWSROOM

Dog down a mine, cat on the tracks, snakes in a fire station, blood-sharing vampire bats and the emotional life of cows

LUCKY PETS

Heard the one about the dog who fell in a tin mine? A German shepherd cross named Bo fell 70ft (21m) down a disused tin mine shaft in Cornwall. Luckily, Bo bounced to a soft landing and was saved by fire crews who, using ropes and pulleys, lowered a special animal rescuer into the mine, at St Hilary near Penzance.

Bo was a fortunate dog, but his luck was as nothing compared with the good fortune of Blitz, a cat with evidently more than nine lives. He was discovered lying on the tracks between the running and live rails in a tunnel at Transport for London's Tufnell Park Tube station. When first spotted at 6am Blitz was thought to be dead, but at 1pm (and after 250 trains had passed over him) a Tube worker spotted movement, and Blitz was scooped up by Transport for London's Emergency Response Unit. In fact, he had not been struck by a train, but had been attacked by foxes (London is home to a substantial number of increasingly bold urban foxes). He had deep bite wounds, a suspected broken back and his sciatic nerve was exposed. His tail was so badly damaged that it had to be removed, and his back legs were seemingly useless. He was kept at a vet's intensive care unit on three separate drips and various painkilling medicines. After a week, he began grooming; his back legs began to work again, and with a regained appetite he was returned home to his family. *Hamhigh.co.uk*, 30 Jan; *Sunday*, 2 Feb; *S. Express*, 9 Feb 2020.

UNLUCKY PETS

In early January, the bodies of three adult pythons and a cat were found close to each other in woods near Lanark, Scotland. One month later, two more dead pythons were discovered, this time at a nature reserve in Den of Maiden Craig, Aberdeen. One had been slit open along the length of its body, while the other was in several pieces. Also in February, a passer-by on a



TOP: Firefighters mount a rescue operation to free German shepherd Bo from the mine shaft into which he had fallen. ABOVE LEFT: The hapless hound, unfazed following his ordeal. ABOVE RIGHT: Blitz the cat has used up some of his nine lives.

Thirteen royal pythons were found inside a pillowcase

Scottish beach stumbled upon yet another dead python. The adult snake was emaciated and suffering from malnutrition, and had been put inside a bag which was left on Musselburgh beach, East Lothian.

Later in February, 13 royal pythons were found inside a pillowcase featuring *Toy Story* character Buzz Lightyear. The snakes had been dumped next to a bin behind Farringdon fire station in Sunderland. One of them later died, but the others were being cared for by a vet. Thirteen days later, a further 16 snakes were found at the same fire station. The 15 corn snakes and one carpet python had been left in a bin inside two pink pillowcases, and, an RSPCA inspector noted, had been very

fortunate not to have ended up in landfill.

Elsewhere in the northeast of England, a dog walker found a frightened skunk cowering beside a tree in woodland near Darlington, County Durham this February. When help arrived, the abandoned animal sprayed its rescuers with its notoriously noxious scent. An RSPCA spokesperson said the smell was still lingering in his van despite three deep cleans.

The following month in Darlington, volunteers for the National Animal Sanctuaries Support League (NASSL) were dismayed to find 20 hamsters had been stuffed in takeaway food containers and dumped in a hedge. The 18 Syrian and two dwarf hamsters were discovered by a dog walker. A NASSL spokesperson described the find as "bizarre and heartbreaking", adding that the animals were "traumatised but otherwise in good shape". *D.Mirror*, 4 Jan; *D.Star*, *Metro*, 7+14 Feb; *BBC News*, 15 Feb+3+4 Mar; *Sun*, 17+18 Feb; *independent.co.uk*, 18 Feb 2020.

BLOODY KISS OF THE VAMPIRE BAT

A new study has shown how vampire bats establish friendships by sharing regurgitated blood with their neighbours. Researchers from the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama say the mammals' behaviour, described by one as a "kind of horrifying French kiss", appeared to be an important element of bonding. If bats have no food for three days, they may die of starvation, therefore blood-sharing can be a life-saving act.

The study, published last year in the journal *Current Biology*, found that when the bats became isolated in a roost, pairs in close proximity but unknown to each other would begin grooming, then "mouth-licking", then swapping food. The study's author, Professor Gerald Carter, a behavioural ecologist at Ohio State University, compared food sharing in vampire bats with the way birds regurgitate food for their offspring, with the difference that the bats do so for other adults.

Vampire bats are the only mammals who feed solely on blood, and can drink up to half their weight in blood a day. A previous scientific study found that bats who form bonds during captivity often continue these relationships after being released back into the wild. *BBC News*, 20 Mar 2020.

EMOTICOWS

Cows' moos are used to express emotions such as excitement, arousal, engagement or distress, according to University of Sydney researchers. Moos also help the cows maintain contact with the rest of the herd, and each cow has an individual voice. Although this may not come as a great surprise, given that cows are social, gregarious animals, the lead researcher claims this is the first time cows' voices had been comprehensively analysed for pitch changes and individual characteristics. *<i>*, 17 Jan 2020.

PAUL SIEVEKING offers a menu of ancient cheese and eggs, complete with disposable wine cups

FROZEN 'DOG' STUMPS SCIENTISTS

A puppy was found in Siberian permafrost near the Indigirka River, just north of Yakutsk in the summer of 2018. It still has its thick fur, velvety nose and sharp milk teeth intact. It was so well preserved because it was found in a tunnel dug into the permafrost. DNA sequencing has been unable to determine the species, which could mean it represents an evolutionary link between wolves and modern dogs. Radiocarbon dating was able to determine the age when it died (two months) and how long it has been frozen (18,000 years). Genome analyses showed that it was male. The puppy has been named "Dogor", which means 'friend' in Yakutian and is also the start of the question 'dog or wolf?' It could be a very early modern wolf, a very early dog or a late Pleistocene wolf. Modern dogs are believed to be descendants of wolves, but there is debate over when dogs were domesticated. A 2017 study published in the journal *Nature Communications* suggested domestication could have occurred as far back as 20,000 to 40,000 years ago. *Kennedy News*, *unilad.co.uk*, 26 Nov; *D.Mail*, 27 Nov; *BBC News*, 28 Nov; *D.Telegraph*, 29 Nov 2019.

CHEESE FINDS

A whitish substance in a jar, covered by fabric resembling cheesecloth and found in the tomb of Ptahmes, mayor of Memphis in Egypt between 1290 BC and 1213 BC, contained more than 90 animal proteins, closely resembling those produced in goat, sheep, cow and water buffalo milk, making it the oldest solid cheese ever discovered. It also contained peptides that belonged to *Brucella melinensis*, the bacterium causing brucellosis, which causes a fever that nowadays is treated with antibiotics. Brucellosis is spread through the consumption of infected dairy products that have not been pasteurised. Remains of cheese-like products older than the jar's contents had previously been discovered in Poland, China and Egypt, but they were the products of natural fermentation, so were more like yoghurt than cheese. *Irish Independent*, 18 Aug; *Economist*, 25 Aug 2018.

Subsequent reports announced a much earlier date for cheese-making. Analysis of fatty residue found in pottery from two Neolithic sites on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia has revealed evidence of soft cheeses and yoghurts dating back 7,200 years, with pottery vessels used to hold milk 500 years earlier than that. Experts believe prehistoric societies discovered cheese by accident, after milk curdled while being kept in animal skins. *D.Telegraph*, 7 Sept 2018.



ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF YAKUTIA



ABOVE: The frozen pup found in Siberian permafrost: is it a dog or a wolf? LEFT: The broken jar found in Egypt, which turned out to contain the world's oldest solid cheese.

Then last September scientists using mass spectrometry identified milk protein entombed in calcified dental plaque (calculus) on the teeth of seven prehistoric farmers from Britain. This showed that humans were consuming dairy products 6,000 years ago – despite being lactose intolerant – suggesting they processed the raw milk into cheese, yoghurt or some other fermented product, reducing its lactose content and making it more palatable. Some of the milk residues found in pots appear to have been heated, which would be required for processing raw milk into cheese or some other product. The human remains tested in the study came from three Neolithic sites: Hambledon Hill in Dorset, Hazleton North in Gloucestershire, and Banbury Lane in Northamptonshire, suggesting dairy consumption was

widespread. More than one quarter of the pottery fragments at Hambledon Hill had milk lipids on them. Other Neolithic sites show evidence of animal herds consistent with those used for dairying.

Lactose intolerance arises from the inability to digest the lactose sugar contained in milk beyond infancy, meaning that milk-based foods can cause uncomfortable symptoms such as abdominal pain, diarrhoea and nausea. However, many modern Europeans possess a genetic mutation that allows for the continued consumption of milk into adulthood. This mutation affects a section of DNA controlling the activity of the gene for lactase – an enzyme that breaks down lactose sugar.

Genetic studies of ancient populations from across Eurasia show that lactase persistence only became common very recently, despite the consumption of milk products in the Neolithic. The mutation had started to appear by the Bronze Age, but even at this time, it was only present in 5-10 per cent of Europeans. The Neolithic age in Britain lasted from about 6,000 to 4,400 years BP and saw the introduction of farming, including the use of domesticated animals such as cows, sheep, pigs and goats. The study was published in the journal *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences*. *BBC News*, 10 Sept; *D.Telegraph*, *D.Mail*, 11 Sept 2019. For more on early cheese, see **FT314:16**.

SINGLE USE NO NOVELTY

A disposable clay wine cup, 3,500 years old, went on display in December next to a waxed paper cup from the 1990s at an exhibition in the British Museum entitled “Disposable? Rubbish and Us”. Thousands of such handleless, conical clay cups have been discovered at Minoan sites at the palace of Knossos and elsewhere in Crete. Minoans gathered at the palace for parties, feasts and gatherings including bull-leaping festivals – a more risky version of hurdles. As curator Julia Farley said, “much like today, nobody wanted to do the washing up.” (We are reminded of the single-use earthenware chai cups, which are crushed and literally returned to earth all over in India.) *Guardian*, 16 Dec 2019.

CARP AQUACULTURE

The Shijing, the oldest surviving collection of ancient Chinese poetry, mentions carp being reared in a pond circa 1140 BC, and historical records describe carp being raised in artificial ponds and paddy fields in East Asia by the first millennium BC. Researchers have now analysed fish bones excavated from the Early Neolithic Jiahu site in Henan Province, China. By comparing the body-length distributions and species-composition ratios of the bones with findings from East Asian sites with present aquaculture, they provide evidence of managed carp aquaculture at Jiahu dating back to 6200-5700 BC. Jiahu is known for the early domestication of rice and pigs, as well the early development of fermented beverages, bone flutes, and possibly writing.

Based on the analysis of carp remains from Jiahu and data from previous studies, researchers hypothesise three stages of aquaculture development in prehistoric East Asia. In Stage 1, humans fished the marshy areas where carp gather during spawning season. In Stage 2, these marshy ecotones were managed by digging channels and controlling water levels and circulation so the carp could spawn and the juveniles later harvested. Stage 3 involved constant human management, including using spawning beds to control reproduction and fish ponds or paddy fields to manage adolescents. Although rice paddy fields have not yet been identified at Jiahu, the evolution of carp aquaculture with wet rice agriculture seems to be connected. *sciencedaily.com*, 16 Sept 2019.

PHALLIC MONUMENT

Swedish archaeologist Gisela Ångeby has discovered a remarkably naturalistic 21in (53cm) stone phallus during an excavation in Rollsbo near Gothenburg. It was initially thought to be a grave; but as no human remains were found, only a few burnt animal bones, it appears the site – dating from



TOP: A 'single use' clay wine cup next to its modern counterpart at the British Museum. ABOVE LEFT: The stone phallus found near Gothenburg. ABOVE RIGHT: The complete Roman chicken's egg dug up in Aylesbury.

the later Bronze Age, between 1800 and 500 BC – was used for sacrifices, possibly to a fertility god. Of course, such phallic representations are found worldwide – for instance lingams in Hindu temples to Shiva – but are seldom modelled so closely on the real thing. It is thought the stone naturally resembled the organ of generation before it was refined. *dailymail.co.uk*, 27 Sept 2019.

WORLD'S OLDEST STINK BOMBS

A dig in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, between 2007 and 2016 has yielded the only complete chicken's egg from Roman Britain. It was one of four, although three broke releasing a “potent stench”. The site borders the Roman road of Akeman Street, under the A41, next to the Roman town at Fleet Marston. Archaeologist Edward Biddulph said the “standout discoveries”

were found in a late third century pit. People threw objects into it for good luck “much like a wishing well”, he said. “The pit was still waterlogged and this has preserved a remarkable collection of organic objects [such as leather shoes and wooden tools]. Most extraordinary of all was a basketry tray, made of woven oak bands and willow rods, and four chickens' eggs.” Eggs were associated with fertility, rebirth and the Roman gods Mithras and Mercury. Eggshell fragments and chicken bones have been found before, usually in Roman graves. Mr Biddulph believes the eggs and bread basket could have been food offerings cast into the pit as part of a religious ceremony during a funeral procession. The only other intact ancient Roman egg was found in Rome itself in 2010. *BBC News*, 6 Dec; *D.Mail*, 7 Dec 2019.



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

247: PLAGUE-IARISM

Plagues came early in ancient life and literature. The Homeric god Apollo sent an army of lethal mice to harass the Achæan warriors besieging Troy. Their first victims were dogs and horses, along with their inconvenient gnawing through bow-strings.

Moving into 'real history', things get worse, and remain so, for humanity. Of the countless epidemics recorded in the sources, I here present a diseased triptych: one Greek, one Roman, one Byzantine. Each comports mammoth bibliography of books and articles. For readers preferring a general survey, RS Bray's *Armies of Pestilence: The Impact of Disease on History* (2004) is a good bet.

In 430 BC, second year of the Peloponnesian (Civil) War, Athens was stricken with an epidemic whose death toll is modernly estimated at c. 75-100,000. It recurred twice, also touched the eastern Mediterranean. Significantly, the besieging Spartan army was unaffected, nor did it spread across Greece. Hellenes were no strangers to plagues. The lengthy Hippocratic treatise *On Epidemics* catalogues many, with details of symptoms and suggested remedies. Prime witness is historian Thucydides (bk2 chs47-54), himself a victim and survivor, unlike Athenian leader Pericles. Despite his notoriously difficult Greek, which often caused us schoolboys to dub him 'The Plague of Athens', he paints a memorable horripilatory account which for the usual spatial reasons I can only extract and paraphrase.

This disease surpassed all previous ones in its mysterious ferocity. Local doctors, whose proximity to patients caused them the highest mortality rate, had no foreknowledge or remedies. It originated overseas (plagues always do, in ancient historians), spreading from Egypt and Persia into Athens's Piræus dock area. Thucydides makes much of the fact that, pre-plague, Athens had been "remarkably free from other diseases". The illness suddenly struck its victims. Preliminary symptoms were severe headaches, inflamed eyes, bleeding inside mouths and throats. Next came coughing and sneezing, hoarseness of voice, and chest pains. These were followed by violent stomach cramps and retching and vomiting. Though surprisingly free from feverish hotness and pallor, victims' skin became reddish, with pustules and ulcers so burning that people jumped into fountains and cisterns

seeking relief. All this lasted a week. Those who had survived so far were then afflicted with violent, usually fatal, diarrhoea. Those who survived this were then affected in fingers, toes, and genitals; in some cases, people went blind. Strangest of all, thought Thucydides, were those who recovered physically but succumbed to complete amnesia, not knowing who their friends, or indeed themselves, were.

Obviously, the question is: What was this disease? The Athenians were baffled. Modern medics have come up with at least 30 different pathogens as the culprit. In the 18th century, Hester Thrale, Samuel Johnson's benefactor and memorialist, concluded that the plague was Smallpox. Another influence, the European 'Black Death', spurred many to a bubonic conclusion. Nowadays, individual medical researchers have ranged from Ebola or Marburg to Viral Hemorrhagic Fever to Legionnaire's Disease to Toxic Shock Syndrome, sometimes nicknamed for Thucydides. However, thanks to AW Gomme's *Commentary on Thucydides* and a battery of Greek doctors, Typhus (if anything) emerges as the favourite, being powerfully supported in 1999 by the Fifth Annual University of Maryland Medical Conference, which was devoted to the mystery.

Moving forward to Rome, the Antonine Plague (named for emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus) broke out in 165, lasted until 180, causing at its peak 2,000 deaths per day, according to contemporary historian Dio Cassius. Modern extrapolations make this a death rate of 25 per cent, with total death toll of five million and devastation of both local populations and the Roman army. For the complete story, see JF Gilliam, *American Journal of Philology* 82 (1961), 225-50, online. As usual, blame is external: Roman soldiers bringing it back from Eastern campaigns. Later Roman historians give a pandemic picture, spreading into Gaul and along the Rhine frontier. As with Athens, the disease has not been identified to universal satisfaction; Measles and Smallpox lead the field.

Of coronavirus-related interest is the fact that, according to Chinese annals, there was a rampant epidemic at the same time in that country, with consequent disruption of Roman trade in Asia. An equally modern note is struck by popular quack prophet Alexander of Abonoteichos,

who circulated a verse claiming to be a magic charm against infection, to be written in doorways. No doubt coronavirus will throw up similar charlatans.

Sailing to Byzantium, we meet the great outbreak of AD 542 in the reign of Justinian, who emulated Thucydides in surviving an attack. The major account is an eyewitness one by resident historian Procopius, also secretary to the crack general Belisarius: *Histories*, bk2 chs22-33. Of modern studies, Lester Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity* (2006) is worth a look. There is a putative problem with this. Like all Byzantine writers, his chief literary aim was to be mistaken for a classical model, in his case Thucydides, whose account was later much imitated by Byzantine historians describing the European 'Black Death'. Thus, many of Procopius's details and phraseology read like a crib, leading some modern editors and critics to underplay his veracity.

In brief, Procopius says the epidemic was world-wide, in Constantinople lasting four months, with a daily death toll rising to 10,000. Some caution needed here. Where could he obtain this or any firm statistic? Ancient historians routinely exaggerated military casualties; perhaps also medical ones. Same caveat might equally apply to modern accounts. Later sources speak of recurrences down to the eighth century, claiming a death toll of 25-50 million, equivalent to a quarter of the world's population at that time. Various recent writers have indeed started to question such figures. Unlike the Athenian and Antonine ones, there is general agreement that this was a form of the Bubonic Plague, transported and spread by rats carrying plague-infested fleas.

"It was 20 years ago today..." that I wrote in FT136:22 about the variety of epidemics reported from first-century AD Rome by the Elder Pliny (*Natural History*, bk26 chs1-3), in particular Mentagra (Lichen), not lethal but so hideous that "any kind of death is preferable". Imported to Rome by an unnamed civil servant from Asia ('Patient Zero'), it caused facial lesions so severe they had to be cauterised down to the bone, leaving horrific scars. Odd thing was that women, slaves, and the 'lower classes' were unaffected. Only victims were aristocratic men, "infected through the fleeting contact of a kiss" – shades of Mononucleosis, once dubbed 'the Kissing Disease'.



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Just One of Those Things

ALAN MURDIE explores the late Mary Rose Barrington's research into one-off poltergeist-like events

In my last column, I raised the possibility that unexplained movements of objects and strange noises in haunted houses could be generated by energy emanating from living persons. It is not a new idea, and one long advanced as the possible explanation for poltergeist disturbances since the mid-19th century, prompting a fashion for labelling adolescents and young women typically at their centre as a class of 'unconscious mediums' or, more quaintly, 'electric girls'.

Just as I was writing this continuation piece, there came the sad news of the death of a veteran researcher in this field, Mary Rose Barrington (1926-2020) whom I knew for over 30 years and who was fascinated by all such effects. Joining the Society for Psychical Research in 1957, Mary Rose had a long and distinguished record of serious investigation, specialising in physical manifestations both inside and outside the séance room. Her most evidential success was recording unexplained rapping sounds from the headboard of the bed of a young boy at a family home near Euston Square, London, in 2000 (see 'Report on Psychokinetic Activity Surrounding A Seven Year-Old Boy' in *Journal of the SPR* [2001] vol 65 201-217).

There was a touch of Miss Marple about Mary Rose, but such an impression faded swiftly upon encountering at first-hand her shrewd intellect or finding oneself on the receiving end of her thoughtful and perceptive criticisms. She was particularly intrigued by one-off poltergeist-like events, proposing in 1991 they should be treated as a class of psi phenomenon in their own right. She coined the rather whimsical label, 'Just-one-of-those-things' ('JOTTs' for short) to classify them (see **FT391:42-47** for more on polts and JOTTs).

JOTTs are baffling minor physical incidents, usually occurring only once. Consequently, JOTTs may be dismissed as accidents, coincidence, mistakes, or, in cases of objects that are lost, ascribable to simple forgetfulness.

Originally, I was rather sceptical of such single deeds by poltergeists. They are very anecdotal and might be easy to mistake or fake, though such catch-alls would be less easy to apply to well-witnessed major feats such as large pieces of furniture being moved, or fires.

A classic example reputedly occurred at the riverside Ferry Boat Inn at Holywell, Huntingdonshire, where the ghost of Juliet Tewesley allegedly manifests every St



Patrick's Night (an accidentally created tradition, exposed in **FT342:48-51**). Once, it is said, a boatload of visitors turned up a day early, to be told by the landlord, "She'll not make her presence known tonight", whereupon a barrel was mysteriously wrenched off the wall (See *Haunted Britain*, 1973, by Anthony Hippisley Cox).

A great story, but its one-off occurrence status (assuming it is true) leaves it open to easy dismissal, since a single episode might conceivably have arisen from any number of natural causes.

I am no longer so sceptical, now having enjoyed some direct experience of such

JOTTs myself – though perhaps 'enjoyed' is the wrong word. Some can be distinctly troubling; equally some have a reassuring quality occurring soon after the death of friends or relatives. But it's not my own personal experience that impresses me, rather the sheer quantity of such instances and their persistence reported over many years that I find significant.

Mary Rose commenced a lengthy study of JOTTs with the attention and care of an Edwardian lady butterfly collector. Over the 25 years 1991-2016 she obtained what she considered as 180 well-attested examples, eventually publishing a book in 2018 devoted to analysing 74 of these.

She maintained that JOTTs could be further subdivided into six different categories. She variously labelled these the 'Walkabout' where an object disappears from one location and reappears in another; the 'Turn-up' in which a known article from an originally uncertain position just appears somewhere else; the very forteen category of the 'Windfall' when an article from an unknown origin materialises in a place it could not have been normally; the 'Flyaway' – an object disappears and is never seen again – and the 'Come-back' where an object disappears from its usual resting place and then returns; and the 'Trade-in' where one article disappears and is replaced by an item of unknown origin. She also postulated the 'Odd-jott' as an additional type, one so improbable or impossible that the rational mind rebels against it and what is perceived. It is these detectable patterns



TOP: Veteran psychical researcher Mary Rose Barrington, who died in February. **ABOVE:** The Ferry Boat Inn at Holywell, Huntingdonshire, site of a supposedly annual ghostly apparition.

and the surrounding circumstances that may suggest a genuine, if wholly mysterious, set of effects at work. And after all, what is a poltergeist but a collection of peculiarities, repeated and writ large? (*JOTT: When Things Disappear... and Come Back or Relocate – and Why It Really Happens*, 2018, by Mary Rose Barrington)

The basic problem with JOTTs is although they may be briefly surprising or frustrating, they are typically minor. They seem very trivial and unimportant, hardly worth noting, let alone reporting further. Relatively few JOTTs yield what psychologists call ‘flash-bulb’ memories, whereby you remember yourself and the circumstances of the moment for years afterwards (e.g. the death of Princess Diana, or the shock of people learning of the Kennedy assassination). Consequently, JOTTs may be far more common than realised, but with many being only vaguely acknowledged, likely as not to be dismissed as ‘coincidence’ or even going wholly unnoticed – save when making people think their houses are ‘haunted’.

For Spiritualist believers, such manifestations are typically blamed on discarnate entities. The French writer Alan Kardec (1804-1869), who attempted a theology of Spiritist beliefs, adopted a kind of ‘have-your-cake-and-eat-it’ approach blaming both unknown human energies and spiritual interventions. He believed the energy of living humans could be tapped by troublesome spirits on the astral plane to make mischief here in the material world.

Charles Fort underwent a puzzling spate of domestic incidents himself while staying in London, with pictures repeatedly falling off the walls of a flat he occupied with Mrs Fort (see **FT293:42-45**). No Spiritualist, Fort linked them with the mental states of himself and his wife. “Maybe I am a wizard”, he light-heartedly speculated, floating the notion just at the period when researchers began establishing experiments to test for psychokinetic effects in laboratory trials. Fort’s proposal of human-based wizardry, or even the pre-Spiritualist view that such happenings might be explained as ‘witchcraft,’ seem more in line with these than Spiritist ideas of Kardec. While the very mention of witchcraft attracts much scoffing today, this reflects only a relatively short-term change in intellectual fashion, flowing from the tide of materialist prejudices unleashed by the Enlightenment. During the mid-17th century, witchcraft was an early scientific theory of a kind, based around the belief that living minds could achieve external physical effects remotely. Even William Lecky, author of the *History of Rationalism* (1865), conceded: “If we considered witchcraft probable, a hundredth part of the evidence we possess would have placed it beyond the region of doubt.”



ABOVE: The Bloomsbury flat where Charles and Anna Fort were puzzled by pictures falling from walls.

Charles Fort underwent a puzzling spate of incidents himself while staying in London

Materialist philosophy and prejudices have relegated any concept of personal wizardry to the realm of Harry Potterdom (or at best spoon-bending) for most people in the English-speaking world today. But some 80 years of laboratory research have bolstered the case for a mind-over-matter effect, albeit a much weaker interaction than the strange events reported in haunted houses or at séances.

One of the cases that stimulated Mary Rose Barrington into conceptualising JOTTs as a class of phenomena in their own right began in England in the early 1960s. Dubbed ‘the flying thermometer case’ it concerned a series of strange occurrences spread over years with what was first reported to the SPR as a haunted property.

The house was occupied by a mature British woman given the pseudonym ‘Mrs Mason’, one half of a professional, upper middle-class couple in their late 30s. From recollections Mary Rose shared with me, Mrs Mason had a degree in English and “one of the great things she had in common with her husband was a fixation on *Wuthering Heights*!” Her husband was German Jewish in origin, having come to the UK quite young on the Kindertransport as a refugee from Nazi Germany. As a couple, the Masons were initially very happy together, going on to have a daughter.

Around 1962, their daughter, by then

aged five, started talking a lot about ghosts. To calm her, Mrs Mason told stories about a ‘friendly ghost’, with the child seeming to accept the idea that if ghosts existed, they were harmless. Mrs Mason had once experienced in a ‘haunted room’ bedclothes repeatedly pulled from her while she was fully awake, but so far as she or her husband thought about poltergeists at all, they ranked them as superstition.

No further talk of ghosts took place until November 1963, when one day a pencil fell off a shelf. Mr Mason remarked in a joking sort of way “This house must be haunted!” and from that moment their daughter became obsessed with the idea. By the end of January 1964, she would not be left by herself, afraid even to go into the bathroom alone.

Nothing more might have been thought about this but for two strange incidents. At the end of January 1964, Mr Mason made changes to the garden and cut down an acacia tree, burning its remains on a bonfire. Going into the bathroom after the bonfire, Mrs Mason was surprised to find the child’s bathmat spread out across the floor. Folding it up, she placed it back behind the bath panel where it belonged and went into her daughter’s bedroom. Returning to the bathroom approximately a minute later she found the same mat moved again, but this time merely dumped upon the floor instead of spread out.

Five days later, Mr Mason again began gardening, uprooting and burning shrubs and bushes. That night, around midnight, a thermometer was suddenly thrown across the bathroom, falling at an angle of about 30 degrees. This occurred after Mr Mason had cut down an old rose bush to which Mrs Mason had been very attached.



GHOSTWATCH

A third phenomenon which jointly frightened the couple was being awoken on the night of 18/19 February 1964 by what they described as an appalling “moaning or wailing” noise, seemingly human rather than animal but “not really human”. The noise was heard at 1.15am, when it seemed to come down the staircase, howling outside their half-open door for some five or 10 minutes. The couple heard strange noises in the house, unexplained footsteps, thumps and bangs, creaking floorboards and strong smells of burning or decomposition. These eerie phenomena were later experienced by visitors, convincing them a haunting was underway.

In November 1967, the Masons began redecorating the house. During this Mr Mason raised the question of clearing the attic, which would mean disposing of the pram and other baby things stored there. The next moment they both heard a loud thump from the attic overhead. They gazed up at the ceiling, at one another, and then for some 20 minutes they found themselves listening to an assortment of thumps and creaks, like those heard in 1964.

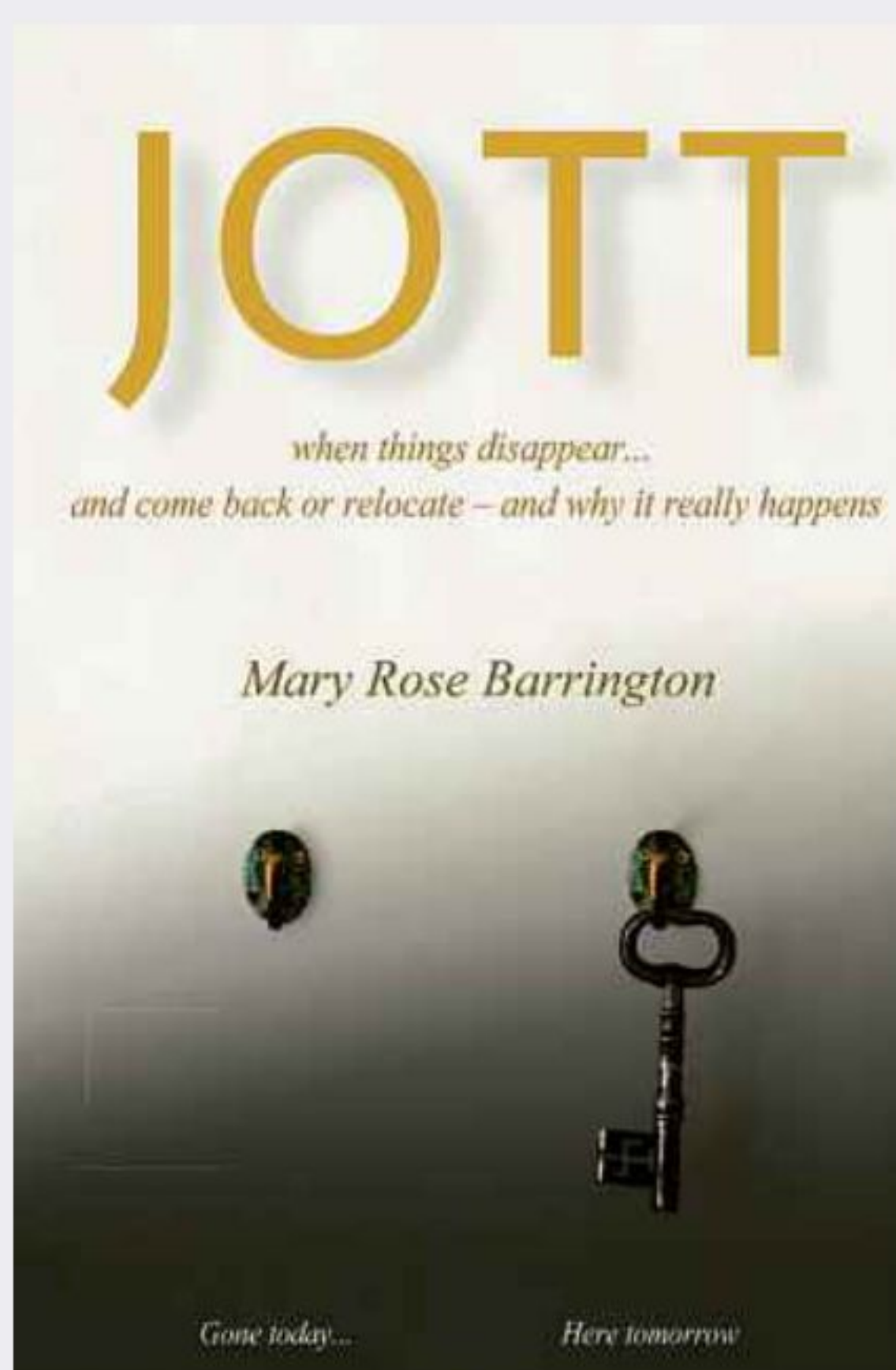
Upon interviewing Mrs Mason, Mary Rose gained the impression (later corrected) that Mrs Mason reacted angrily to words about “getting rid of the pram” spoken by her husband, encouraging an interpretation that the knockings were a psychokinetic ‘substitute’ for Mrs Mason stamping on the floor or metaphorically ‘hitting the roof’.

This interpretation was rejected by Mrs Mason, who felt that her reaction was one of sorrow rather than anger, arising from unresolved emotional problems. She believed that if that attic knocking had any meaning, it was a symbolic representation of that most critical moment of being “deprived of the child who would have made use of the pram” and that “mention of the pram in the loft forced into my mind a flood of distressing memories of past events.”

This led to more probing questions about her personal history. It emerged Mrs Mason had suffered a depressive illness after the birth of her daughter. During treatment for this, she was found to be pregnant, and her doctor insisted on an abortion on psychiatric grounds.

Mrs Mason stated: “I was very happy about the pregnancy and delighted at the prospect of a second child... For many weeks I resisted the doctor’s repeated arguments and dire warnings and refused a termination” (at the time abortions were illegal in England, save on extreme medical grounds). Mrs Mason was then warned against ever having another baby, as this would probably precipitate a mental illness from which she might never recover and would confine her to an asylum.

Eventually the doctor succeeded in



breaking down her resistance, and the pregnancy was terminated at five months. This proved to be a considerable physical ordeal, as well as a thoroughly unwanted procedure.

Mrs Mason said she remained for some years “in a state of severe unresolved mental conflict – bitterly regretting the termination of my second pregnancy... despite myself, heeding the warnings of my doctor.” Coping as best she could, she found herself thrust into a mire of uncertainty, engendering a chronic anxiety neurosis.

Mrs Mason’s own preferred explanation of the uncanny knocking was that it was inspired by intimidating behaviour from the doctor, including his thumping his fist on the table, admitting this had been what “finally broke my will”.

Mary Rose considered that the second lost child obsessed Mrs Mason’s thoughts at the time and provided the meaning of the effects, including the movements of the baby’s bathmat and the thermometer used to test the water temperature of the child’s bath when an infant. Mrs Mason was also facing seeing the same doctor responsible for the terminated pregnancy.

This element of conflict was strongly present in Mrs Mason’s mind around the time of the manifestations. It supplied a link with the bonfire of vegetation in the garden. It appeared Mrs Mason was greatly averse to the stunting of any form of living growth, an extended form of empathy towards all things growing, fertile, and fruitful. She was particularly very devoted to her acacia tree, considering it the most pleasant feature of her garden.

Mary Rose subsequently told me of keeping in touch with Mrs Mason, gleaned that, until the end of her life, she

LEFT: Barrington’s 2018 book about ‘JOTTs’.

harboured some resentment against her husband, “starting with his refusal to let her have another child”. Mr Mason pre-deceased his wife in 1973 having become “a semi-detached family member” amid later rumours of another woman, though a fact not established. He died from an overdose of painkillers, interpreted as an act of suicide in 1973. Overall, Mrs Mason considered her late husband very manic-depressive. (Sources: ‘The Case of the Flying Thermometer’, *Journal of the SPR* vol.43, 1965-66, pp.11-20; ‘A Poltergeist Revived: The Flying Thermometer Case Again in *Journal of the SPR* vol.48, 1975-6, pp.293-97). Altogether, the picture presented suggests a human causation for the disturbances in what otherwise might have been logged as another haunted house troubled by ghosts.

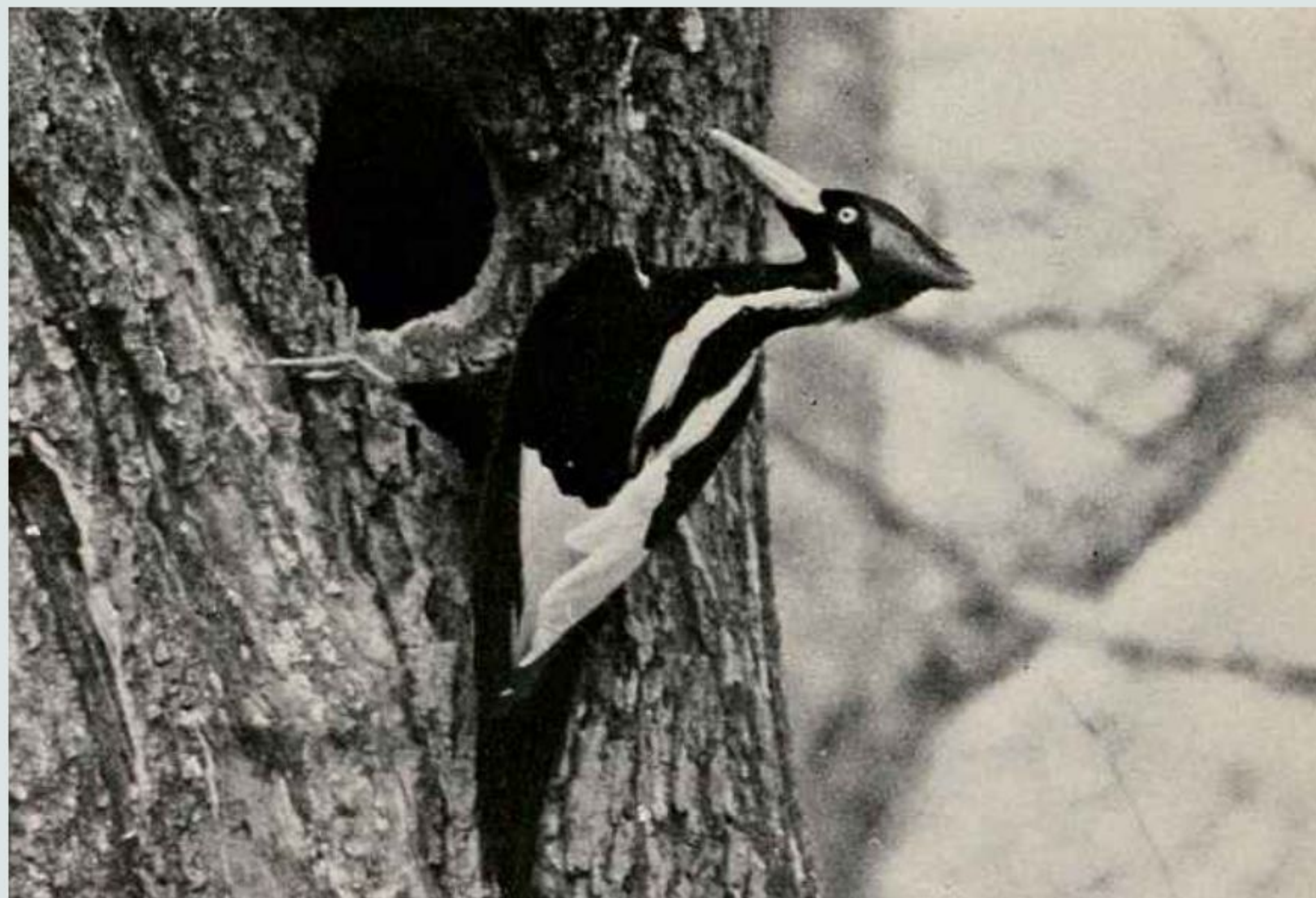
Unfortunately, the stop-start nature of research into spontaneous cases means that often it is not possible to either discover or monitor long-term psychological history of families living in haunted homes. The case of the Masons might be compared with an analogous case of minor physical disturbances at the apartment of a Brazilian couple in São Paulo who were considering whether to embark upon starting a family, recorded in the early 1990s. Psychologist Fatima Marchado considered the odd events reflected an expression of the wife’s “desire to have a baby” and “her desire to punish [her husband] because it was his fault they were childless.” (See Fatima Marchado, 2001, in *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary perspectives*, eds. J Houran & R Lange, pp.195-213).

More widely, the link with cutting down garden plants also reminds one of the Ardachie Lodge case in Scotland in August 1953, where strange rapping sounds were interpreted as manifestations by the female ghost of a past owner expressing concern about the fate of a rose garden. However, a possible human causation arising from a living individual, a highly-strung woman, who had just arrived at the property, might not be ruled out and could have provided a better solution. (see PJM McEwan, ‘The Ardachie Case’ in *Journal of the SPR* (1955-56) vol.38, pp.159-72). But there was no opportunity for any deeper analysis of the personality of the woman concerned, or the psycho-dynamics of the household.

However, any theoretical model based upon purely human causation does not easily explain hauntings that involve apparitions, or persistent phenomena that continue in one place regardless of changes in occupancy. And in most cases, the people affected just simply want all phenomena to stop.



KARL SHUKER hopes that a cash reward will help settle an ornithological controversy



ABOVE: Male Ivory-billed woodpecker at entrance of nest, photographed in Singer Tract, Louisiana, by Arthur A Allen in April 1935. BELOW: The launch of the “Ohio: An Unnatural History” exhibition.

A FUND FOR A FIND

A US\$12,000 reward is being offered by the Louisiana Wilds Project for information leading to the discovery of an active ivory-billed woodpecker roost or nest cavity. This iconic American species, *Campephilus principalis*, is not only one of the world’s largest woodpeckers but also one of its most elusive. Once common across the southeastern USA and Cuba, its numbers plummeted during the first half of the 20th century due to habitat destruction caused by massive deforestation programmes, and for over 40 years now there has been considerable controversy as to whether it still exists. (It is currently categorised as Critically Endangered by the IUCN.)

Every so often there has been a claimed sighting, sometimes by very experienced ornithologists. Indeed, Matt Courtman, currently Executive Director of the Louisiana Wilds Project as well as a former president of the Louisiana Ornithological Society, claims to have made three separate ivory-bill sightings in 2019, one of which – on 10 March – featured a pair of the birds. However, there has been no unequivocal photographic evidence or any physical evidence, such as actual specimens or discovered active nests. A major problem in accepting anecdotal evidence is confusion between this species and the somewhat smaller but otherwise superficially similar – and much more

common – pileated woodpecker.

A comparable situation prevails on Cuba, with the most recent sightings deemed reliable dating back to the 1980s. Several ‘earwitnesses’ claim to have heard its characteristic calls and raps made with its beak on tree trunks, but again this is not deemed proof-positive by itself of the bird’s existence. Whether the sizeable reward now offered by Louisiana Wilds will achieve its aim of formally confirming the continued existence of this beautiful species – crow-sized with striking black-and-white plumage and scarlet crest in the male (black in the female) – remains to be seen. www.redriverradio.org/post/12k-reward-offered-finding-rare-woodpecker 27 Feb 2020.

GETTING MONSTROUS IN OHIO

The State of Ohio is famed for the diversity of its legendary monsters, from ‘conventional’ cryptids like Chessie the Chesapeake Bay sea serpent, the Lake Erie monster known as South Bay Bessie, and its very own variety of bigfoot called the grassman – to such decidedly unconventional entities as the Loveland frogman (see **FT361:38-41**), the Defiance dogman, and the headless biker. Now these and other monstrous manifestations are currently being celebrated in their very own public exhibition, staged at the Rutherford & Hayes Presidential Library and Museums, based in Fremont, which runs until Hallowe’en this year.

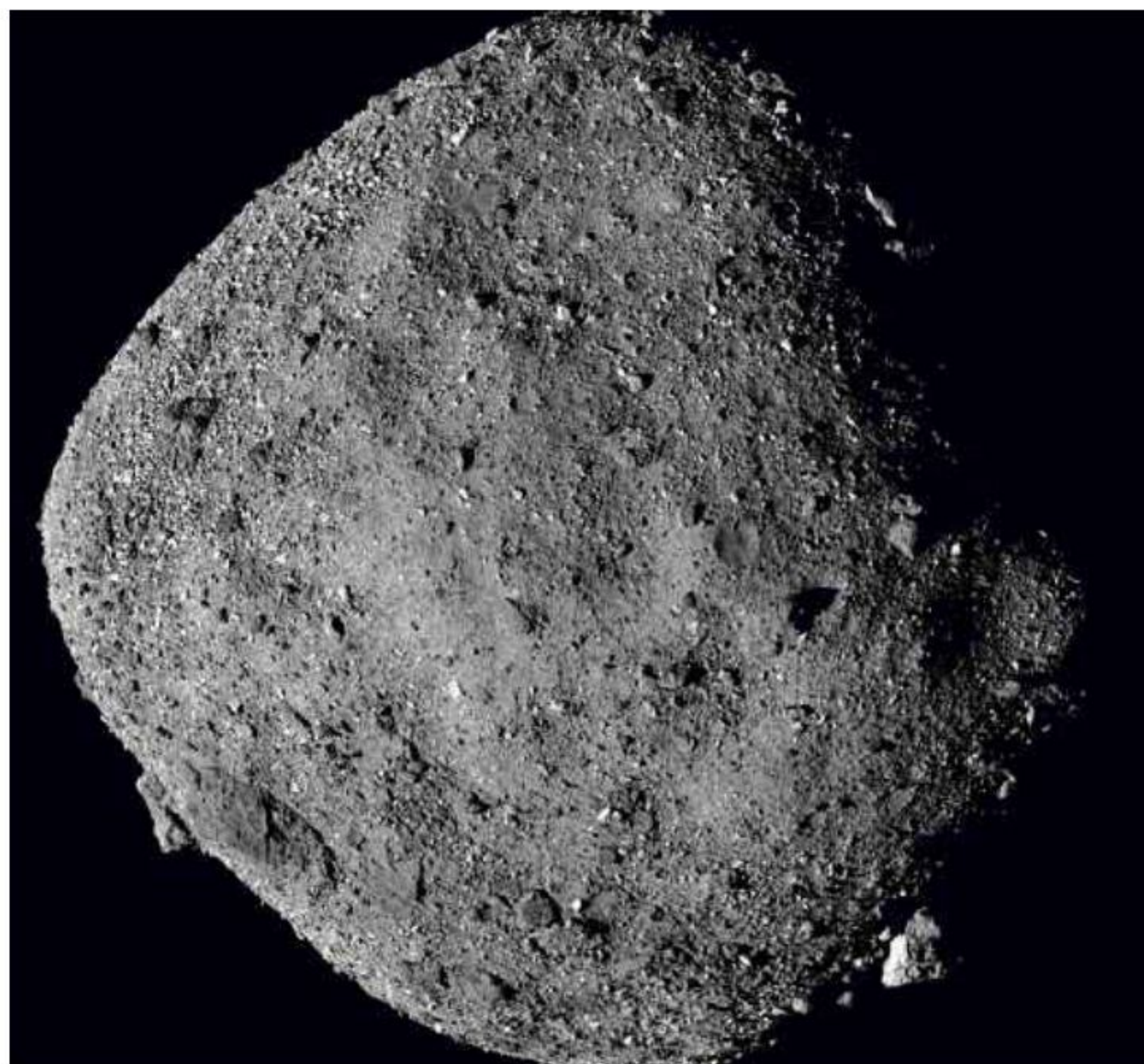
Catering to visitors of all ages and entitled ‘Ohio: An Unnatural History’, the exhibition includes an eye-catching selection of 3-D models created specifically for it by Fremont-born artist Dan Chudzinski, such as a jackalope, a mandrake, a unicorn skull, and a bigfoot footprint cast. A specially prepared detailed map of Ohio annotated with a list of monster sightings will be available to purchase at the museum’s gift shop, and seven of the monsters featured in the exhibition will be represented by life-sized cut-outs. So if any cryptozoologists in or around Ohio are seeking somewhere to visit for a monstrously good time, you know where to go. www.msn.com, 24 Feb 2020.

Update: Due to the coronavirus outbreak, the Museum is now closed for the foreseeable future, but you can get an inside look at the exhibition through this video gallery talk with Curator of Artifacts Kevin Moore: www.rbhayes.org/news/2020/03/17/general/gallery-talk-special-exhibit-ohio-an-unnatural-history.





SPACE BULLETIN | More interplanetary updates, including colliding stars, mini-moons, and cosmic lights that could point to an alien civilisation



NASA

ABOVE: Asteroid Bennu, which, with its exploding rocks and micrometeoroids, has proven to be far more 'alive' than scientists expected,

BENNU SURPRISES

Last year, NASA's OSIRIS-REx spacecraft was circling Bennu, a large asteroid that regularly passes close to Earth. OSIRIS-REx has been mapping the asteroid's rocky surface using cameras and other instruments to help identify the best spot to land, later this year. The intention is to scoop up a sample of rock that will be brought back to Earth – in 2023. Bennu lacks a heated core necessary for geological activity, so is not technically 'alive', but researchers don't consider the asteroid entirely 'dead' either, since it regularly emits small rocks. Some of these crash back down to Bennu's surface, while others escape into deep space. But a third category is the rocks that wind up orbiting Bennu for a few days as mini-moons before returning to the surface.

This phenomenon is hitherto unprecedented and looks set to revolutionise our understanding of asteroids. "It wasn't that long ago that the conventional wisdom was that asteroids are these dead bodies that didn't change very much," says Carl Hergenrother, the University of Arizona astronomer who

identified Bennu as a suitable target for OSIRIS-REx, who explains that as such behaviour could never have been seen from the ground, no one had seen an active asteroid up close in this way before. "So the question that is still on our minds," he added, "is are we seeing a lower intensity process that is similar to what happens on other active asteroids, or is this something entirely different?"

The exploding rocks are not the first surprise yielded by Bennu. Last year, the OSIRIS-REx team observed 100cm (40in) sized particles exploding from the asteroid's surface on three occasions; no one is yet sure why. The spacecraft's cameras also detected a significant number of particles already orbiting Bennu, like a cloud of gnats. Scientists have previously seen massive ejections from around two dozen asteroids as they passed by Earth, but the mechanisms proposed to explain why these asteroids were ejecting material don't apply to Bennu. The centrifugal force of an asteroid's spin could eject material from the surface, but wouldn't account for the range of particle orbits observed around

Bennu. Similarly, sublimation of ice water (the phenomenon that produces a comet's tail) won't suffice as an explanation because OSIRIS-REx detected particle ejections on certain parts of Bennu's surface that are far too hot for ice.

The OSIRIS-REx team has identified two possible causes; firstly, Bennu's extreme temperatures, which range from 240°F to -100°F (116°C to -73°C). A transition from boiling to freezing can result in particles cracking and flying apart. Secondly, Bennu's bombardment by micrometeoroids, which, when they hit its surface, cause particles to be dislodged.

Unfortunately, OSIRIS-REx won't remain in this location, observing Bennu, long enough to resolve the problem by itself, as the spacecraft has many other tasks to perform before returning to Earth. However, given how little we still know about asteroids, Hergenrother says there is now a strong case to be made for a dedicated mission to study the particle-ejection phenomenon on another asteroid in future. *wired.com*, 5 Dec 2019.

AUSTRALIAN 'MINI-MOON'

Fireballs in the Earth's atmosphere are not uncommon sights for skywatchers. A 2016 fireball that exploded over the Australian desert was at first deemed unremarkable, until images taken by a network of cameras that monitor the skies were examined. The Desert Fireball Network's six cameras, spanning hundreds of miles across the Australian desert, managed to observe the 22 August 2016 fireball in great detail. The resulting camera images yielded data indicating the rock to be a temporarily captured orbiter, or, colloquially, a mini-moon. Its slow (6.8 miles/11km per second) velocity suggested it had probably been in orbit around Earth before crashing; a near-vertical trajectory ruled out satellite debris. The research team led by planetary scientist Patrick Shoemaker of Australia's Curtin

University calculated it 95 per cent probable the object was a temporarily captured orbiter.

There are so many rocks shooting past Earth, possibly millions, that it's logical some will penetrate the atmosphere. Most end up as bolides (meteors that explode in mid-air before reaching the ground). But every now and then, one of these asteroids becomes captured in the Earth's orbit for a time. It is very unusual; a 2012 computer simulation with 10 million virtual asteroids had just 18,000 caught in Earth's orbit. *sciencealert.com*, 2 Dec 2019.

ON THE BLINK

A survey of astronomical observations made over the past 100 years led by Sweden's Stockholm University is searching for the Milky Way's weirdest events. The Vanishing & Appearing Sources during a Century of Observations (VASCO) project has found records of 100 separate sightings of red lights in the Earth's skies over the past 70 years. Astrophysicists are hypothesising that these blinking red lights could be evidence of previously unseen astronomical phenomena, or of alien civilisations. Faced with examining over 600 million objects, the researchers whittled their search down to just 100 by focusing on observations of objects in space that either just disappear, or that have rapidly fluctuating brightness levels varying over a 70-year time period. The strangest objects flare up and dim across several orders of magnitude beyond the limits of what's generally regarded as the norm for other types of highly variable objects, such as eclipsing binary systems or active galactic nuclei outbursts. A few even seem to have vanished.

Dying stars take millions or billions of years to transition to different evolutionary stages. Rapid changes over just 70 years are quite unprecedented, suggesting a phenomenon (or phenomena) not yet understood.



STEPHAN RIDGWAY / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

CRATER DATED

A re-examination of the Wolfe Creek Crater (pictured above) in Western Australia has established it to be 120,000 years old, not 300,000 years old as was previously thought. The site is one of seven sets of impact craters in Australia, all 120,000 years old or less, that were created when a meteor collided with Earth. As a result of this new dating, the frequency of meteor strikes has had to be recalculated. Scientists now believe that a meteor hits Earth every 180 years. *D.Telegraph, 3 Jan 2020.*

One explanation is that the historical sightings record R Coronæ Borealis stars (a rare type of carbon-rich supergiant), whose brightnesses can fade up to nine magnitudes over irregular time intervals. Another is that the transient events are failed supernovæ, thought to be the result of a gigantic star collapsing directly into a black hole with no sort of visible outburst. Failed supernovæ have been theoretically predicted but not yet confirmed.

“The implications of finding such objects extend from traditional astrophysics fields to the more exotic searches for evidence of technologically advanced civilisations”, says a study published in *The Astrophysical Journal*. Since interstellar optical laser communication in the infrared range has been proposed as a potential indicator of advanced extraterrestrial civilisation, it has been suggested that some of the



LEFT: Supergiant star Betelgeuse seen through the Very Large Telescope of the European Southern Observatory.

transient red blinking lights are indicative of just that. *theregister.co.uk, 13 Dec 2019; cnet.com, 18 Dec 2019.*

GOODBYE BETELGEUSE?

Betelgeuse, one of the brightest stars in the sky, may be set to explode. The red supergiant was formerly one of the easiest stars to identify on account of its brightness and its ‘location’ in

the constellation of Orion. But since October 2019, Betelgeuse has been dimming to such a point that it is now hard to spot with the naked eye. Astronomers believe this indicates a cosmic

supernova is imminent. This rare event would mean that Betelgeuse would become as bright as the full Moon for a few months, casting its own shadow at night, before fading away. Because Betelgeuse is 600 light years away, the supernova, if it occurs, will already have happened just under 600 years ago. Any particles emitted from the explosion will eventually

reach our Solar System, but will take six million years to do so.

Betelgeuse has a mass 12 times that of our Sun, and has been burning so brightly that it is now dying after just eight million years. By contrast, our Sun is already five billion years old. So, Betelgeuse is a star that burns very brightly for a very (comparatively speaking) brief time. Don’t miss the show! *D.Telegraph, 31 Dec 2019.*

NEUTRON CRASH

New observations suggest that the collision, observed in 2017, of two neutron stars blasted a jet of charged particles into space. The discovery supports the theory that mysterious flashes of high-energy light (short gamma-ray bursts) are actually jets from neutron star collisions. *sciencenews.org, 18 Dec 2019.*

P. KERVILLA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



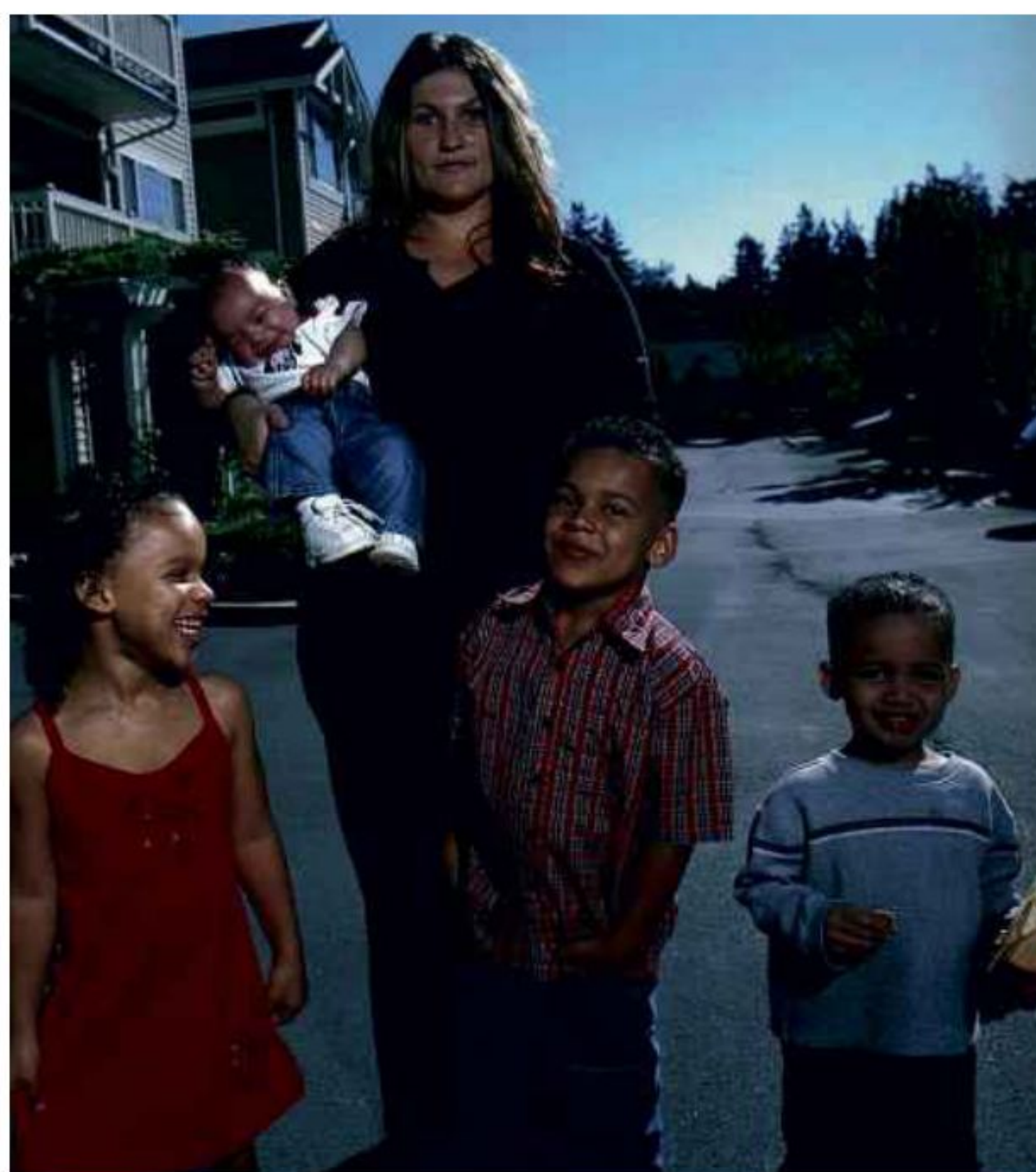
MEDICAL BAG

Genetic profiling was once hailed as a magical new tool to catch criminals, but DNA anomalies mean that its reliability is in question

DNA evidence in criminal trials and disputed paternity cases has come to be viewed as incontestable, perhaps as a result of the eventual conviction of two of Stephen Lawrence's murderers, and of popular TV programmes like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* and the (now discredited) *Jeremy Kyle Show*. However, an increasing number of forensic investigators, lawyers and judges are beginning to raise concerns about the reliability of so-called genetic fingerprinting (aka DNA profiling) as evidence.

In 2012, David Butler, a former taxi driver from Liverpool, was put on trial for the murder of local sex worker Anne Marie Foy, found battered to death in woodland in 2005. DNA samples taken from under her fingernails were said to match that of Butler when searched against a police database following a 'cold case' review. His DNA was on the database because it had been extracted from a cigarette butt found during a 1998 police investigation at his mother's house, following a burglary. Detectives had assumed the butt had been dropped by the burglar; in fact, Butler had left it during a visit to his mother to comfort her after the burglary.

The DNA taken from underneath Foy's fingernails was the only evidence linking her to Butler, whose QC, Michael Wolkind, was scathing in his dismissal of the DNA evidence. Butler, he told the court, suffered from a dry skin condition so severe that his cabbie colleagues had nicknamed him 'flaky'. It was entirely possible, suggested Wolkind, that after taking a fare to the red light district, Butler had given his passenger some change in the form of pound notes – covered in skin cells containing his DNA – which was then given to Foy.



ABOVE LEFT: Lydia Fairchild absorbed her twin while in the womb. ABOVE RIGHT: Chris Long inherited his blood donor's DNA.

Prof Allan Jamieson, a leading DNA forensic expert, was called for the defence. Jamieson, head of the Forensic Institute in Glasgow, has appeared at several high-profile criminal trials, most notably that of Sean Hoey, cleared of the 1998 Omagh bombing which killed 29 people.

Jamieson, while a firm believer in DNA's use as a powerful forensic tool, is concerned that police and prosecutors, incorrectly regarding DNA evidence as incontrovertible, have come to view it as a short-cut to conviction, a substitute for more time-consuming and costly investigation. He has warned of the dangers of human error, contamination and accidents leading to unjust convictions, with particular misgivings about the use of tiny amounts of DNA. Recent technological advances mean that what is known as Low Count DNA may now be extracted from two or three cells of a sample, rather than from hundreds or thousands.

"Does anyone realise how

Certain medical procedures can turn people into chimeras

easy it is to leave a couple of cells of your DNA somewhere?" Jamieson said during an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*. "You could shake my hand and I could put that hand down hundreds of miles away and leave your cells behind". After eight months on remand, David Butler was acquitted.

Further concerns about DNA's reliability were raised when a US man, diagnosed with leukaemia in 2013 and recipient of a bone marrow transplant, learned that the DNA in his blood had changed to that of his donor, 5,000 miles away in Germany. Chris Long, of Reno, Nevada, was encouraged to test his own blood three months after the transplant by his friend and

colleague Renee Romero, based in the crime lab at Washoe County sheriff's office. She had a hunch this could happen since the procedure itself entails the replacement of weak by healthy blood.

Four years after his lifesaving transplant, Long discovered that not only his blood had been affected. Swabs of his lips and cheeks were found to contain both his DNA and that of his donor, whilst all the DNA in his semen corresponded to his donor's. "I thought that it was pretty incredible that I can disappear and someone else can appear," Long said. He has become a chimera, the scientific term borrowed from the Greek mythological creature that was a composite of lion, goat and serpent. Doctors have long known that certain medical procedures can turn people into chimeras, but the implications for law enforcement hadn't been considered – until now.

Each year, tens of thousands of people have bone marrow

transplants for blood cancers, leukæmia, lymphoma, sickle cell anæmia and other disorders. The likelihood of one or more of them becoming a perpetrator or victim of crime was unlikely but not impossible. So Long's sheriff's department have been using their IT colleague as a human guinea pig.

The implications of his case were presented at an international forensic science conference in September 2019. Crime scene investigators who gather DNA evidence were hitherto confident that each victim and each perpetrator leaves behind a single identifying code. Not any more.

This transplant oddity has already misled investigators. In 2004, Alaskan detectives investigating a sexual assault uploaded a DNA profile extracted from semen to a criminal DNA database, which matched a potential suspect. However, at the time of the assault, the man had been in prison. Further enquiries revealed that he had received a bone marrow transplant from his brother, who was eventually convicted of the crime.

Abirami Chidambaram, who worked on the case at Alaska's state scientific crime detection laboratory in Anchorage, said she has since heard of another troubling DNA scenario. Detectives investigating a sexual assault were sceptical of the victim's account because of her insistence that there had been one attacker, while DNA analysis indicated two. Eventually it was established that the second profile was that of her bone marrow donor.

In 2008, Yongbin Eom, a visiting research scholar at the University of North Texas Centre for Human Identification, was trying to establish the identity of a traffic accident victim in Seoul, South Korea. Blood tests showed the individual was female, but the body

appeared to be that of a male. This was confirmed by DNA from the victim's kidney, but the spleen and lung contained both male and female DNA. Eom eventually established that the unfortunate man had previously received a bone marrow transplant from his daughter.

Chris Long's situation has raised an intriguing question – if he has a baby, will she or he inherit his own genes or that of his German donor? In this case, the question will remain unanswered, because Long had a vasectomy some time ago. Bone marrow transplants say it should be impossible for a parent to pass on someone else's genes – but who knows? Fraternal twins sometimes acquire each other's DNA while in the womb. In 2006, Lydia Fairchild of Washington state nearly had her children taken into custody after a DNA test suggested she wasn't their mother. In fact, she had absorbed her own fraternal twin whilst in the womb; effectively, she was her own twin, so that her children acquired the fraternal twin's DNA instead of hers. And in another case, suspicions of infidelity followed a DNA paternity test that indicated a man wasn't the father of his own son. In fact, he, like Lydia Fairchild, had absorbed his fraternal twin before birth.

Experts say a donor's blood cells should not be able to create new sperm cells, but this is just what happened to Long. A doctor who treated him believes Long's vasectomy somehow caused his semen to contain his donor's DNA, but this is just a supposition, and further investigation is planned.

As for Chris Long, he is planning a trip to Germany, where he hopes to meet his donor in person and thank him for saving his life. *liverpoolecho.co.uk*, 11 Feb; *D.Telegraph magazine*, 4 April 2012; *time.com*, 28 Oct 2015; *independent.co.uk*, 9 Dec; *mynews4.com*, 21 Dec 2019.

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

248: GLITTERING PRIZES



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Magpies' nests are full of shiny objects, such as jewellery, which they cannot help themselves from stealing.

The "truth"

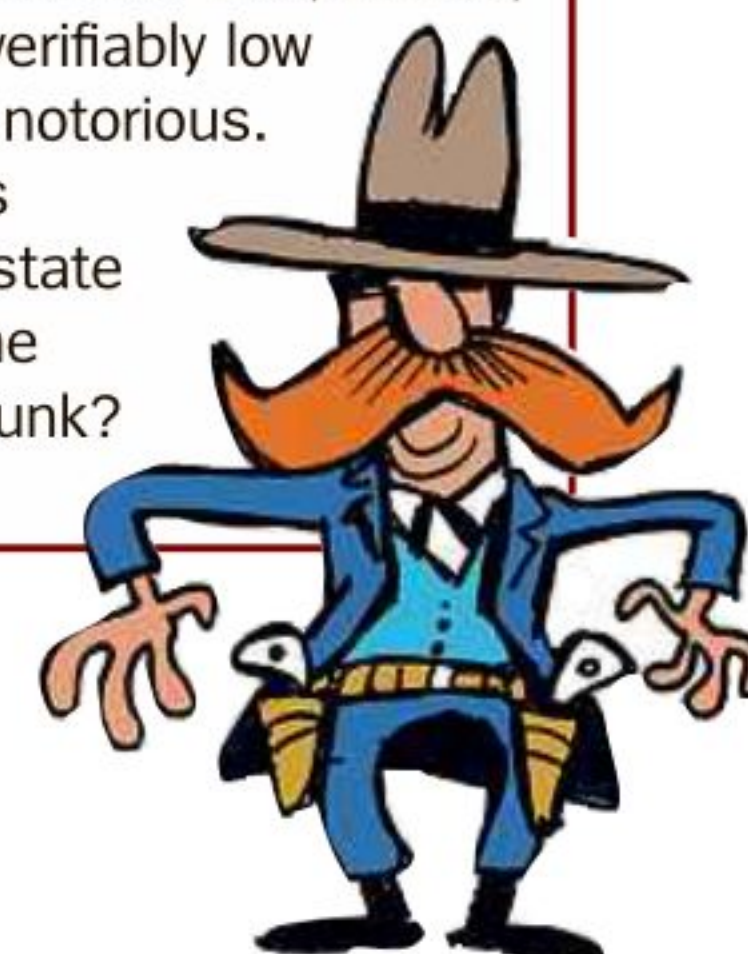
Ornithologists consider the magpie (*Pica pica*) to be unusually driven by curiosity, even compared to other crows. It is well known for poking its beak into anything new that appears in its environment, but there is no evidence to show that a sparkly something grabs its attention more than a dull something. There has even been research which has tentatively suggested that magpies are afraid of shiny things. Studies of magpie nests have not found glittering hoards, although some other species of bird do decorate their nests with attractive items to impress potential mates. The belief in thieving magpies is widespread in European folklore, and was especially popularised by Gioachino Rossini's 1817 opera *La gazza ladra* ('The Thieving Magpie'), in which a servant is almost executed for thefts which have in fact been committed by a bird.

Sources

RSPB Garden Birds by Marianne Taylor, Bloomsbury, 2019; www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-28797519; <https://corvidresearch.blog/2015/12/04/crow-curiosities-do-crows-collect-shiny-objects/>

Mythchaser

A few decades ago, the image of Dodge City as a lawless symbol of the Wild West was undermined by historians who claimed that, in fact, it was a comparatively peaceful burg which had a verifiably low homicide rate throughout the period for which it is notorious. More recently, the inevitable counter-revolution has started, with attempts by some academics to reinstate Dodge's shoot-em-up reputation. So where does the consensus rest at the moment – at debunk or rebunk?



SCAM DIGEST

Suckers are parted from their cash by Qing Dynasty con-men and geriatric gangsters in China; plus Sweden's phantom major



ABOVE LEFT: Chinese fraudsters are accused of using forged documents to con people out of their cash. ABOVE RIGHT: One of the group is questioned by police.

THE 40-YEAR CON

Police in eastern China have detained five people suspected of a swindle aimed at persuading victims to hand over money in exchange for a share in trillions of US dollars. The scammers claimed the huge fund was set up by Nationalists 70 years ago, but was frozen at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949. After arresting the three women and two men at a hotel in Shandong province in December 2019, police found fake army uniforms and forged documents, including fake UN permits and a gun licence issued by the Qing Dynasty (the last imperial dynasty). The gang claimed they were part of a task force established by the UN and by China's Central Military Commission.

A police report says the five crooks have admitted to being members of the International Plum Blossom, a criminal group known to have perpetrated similar scams for the last 10 years. Suspicions were aroused when one man was seen to be wearing an army uniform under his coat. The 54-year-old, known only by his surname, Teng, was asked to produce ID; he took out a 'special pass' issued by the 'general headquarters from the UN peacekeeping force'. He then phoned someone he described

as the 'top leading comrade', warning the policemen they could be suspended if they continued their investigations. Taken to the station for further questioning, the five were searched; receipts for fake deposits from Citibank and HSBC worth several trillion US dollars were found. There was also an order from the Kuomintang government to transfer the money to Taiwan, whence the Nationalists had fled at the end of the civil war in 1949.

Teng confessed that the documents were used to convince people, often elderly, to invest in a crowdfunding project that would unlock the money. Investors were offered up to 10 per cent of the total funds. Officials don't know how many people have fallen victim to the scam over the years, but have been aware of it for at least 40 years. *South China Morning Post*, 15 Dec 2019.

SENIOR SCAMMERS

Also in China, a gang of geriatric criminals has been broken up by police, and its members, aged between 68 and 92, sentenced to jail terms of up to 16 years. The OAP crooks had committed a string of crimes in the city of Yingtuan, Jiangxi province, including extortion, blackmail, violence

In China, a gang of geriatric criminals has been broken up

and kidnapping from 2002 onwards. As well as extortion, their protection racketeering forced shopkeepers to sell them goods at discounted prices.

The kingpin of the gang, surnamed Liu, was sentenced to 16 years' imprisonment. Eighteen others were jailed for between one and 11½ years. Liu is a common clan surname in the province, and the gang operated under the guise of the Liu Family Elderly People's Association. After arrest, the aged gangsters tried to obstruct police investigations by claiming ill-health associated with their advanced years. In addition to the aforementioned crimes, they were also convicted of threatening to attack government offices. *scmp.com*, 10 Jan 2020.

SPAC SCAM?

A controversial Christian church that targets gang members and other vulnerable inner-city youth has been accused of financially

exploiting its congregation. Former members of the UK-based SPAC (Salvation Proclaimers Anointed Church) Nation told journalists that they were persuaded to apply for government welfare benefits, that bank loans were taken out in their names, and that they were coerced into donating blood for medical trials. In all cases, the ensuing money made its way into SPAC Nation's coffers rather than their own bank accounts.

Kurtis, a former senior official of the church, which is registered as a charity, says the organisation should be closed down and that its leader, Pastor Tobi Adegboyega (pictured on facing page), "has to be held accountable". He recalls seeing "bags and bags of money" and claims that church leaders "would ridicule anyone who offered the church less than £3,000". Pastor Adegboyega leads the church, together with five senior pastors known as 'the generals'. They preach a form of 'prosperity theology', the belief that God rewards the faithful with material wealth, and that the more they donate, the more they will be rewarded. 'Prosperity theology' (aka 'Prosperity Gospel') first came to prominence in the USA during post-war 'Healing Revivals'. It became associated



with televangelism in the 1960s, and more infamously so in the 1980s because of wealthy televangelists like Jim Bakker and Oral Roberts, who appealed for donations via TV shows. ‘Prosperity theology’ has subsequently been embraced by millions in the developing world; its emphasis on miracles and financial well-being appeals to the economically powerless.

Adegboyega, who drives a Rolls Royce and sports designer clothing together with a £15,000 watch, has previously been invited to discuss youth issues with Cabinet ministers at 10 Downing Street. Another pastor, Mariam Mbula, 30, has also been seen in a Rolls Royce. She has 13 convictions for 34 offences, including 27 for fraud, and has been jailed in the UK, Belgium and Spain. In one case, she conned a woman whose daughter has Down’s syndrome out of over £15,000 by posing as a Foreign Office official.

Gracy was 21 when she joined SPAC in 2017. She told reporters she was encouraged to apply for Universal Credit after her pastor Ebo Dougan noticed she had stopped donating money to the church. She passed her details to Pastor Dougan and someone filled out an online application form on her behalf; the details were subsequently altered to say she had two children, making her eligible for a £1,200 payment. She was told to pay £900 into two accounts, keeping the rest. Later investigated by the Department for Work and Pensions, she was fined £600 and ordered to repay the £1,200. “I can’t afford it obviously,” she said. “I feel heartbroken because I thought this was supposed to be a family.”

Other ex-members tell of giving “seed

offerings” or donations to SPAC Nation pastors, which sometimes left them with significant debts. Videos circulating on social media show SPAC leaders asking for donations of £1,000 per week. One member, Nino, claims Adegboyega asked him for £20,000 “to launch a housing business,” and that when he refused, “the pastor got angry and asked why I didn’t trust a man of God.” Explaining that he didn’t have that kind of money, he was asked to take out a loan.

Lovis was 18 when a loan was taken out in her name without her knowledge. Diagnosed with kidney cancer in November 2017, she was unable to continue working as an assistant sous chef, so began looking for another job. Invited to an interview by an agency named Zuriel Recruitment, she was unaware the firm was run by Pastor Adegboyega’s number two, Pastor Samuel Akokhia, who has a conviction for attempted robbery. During the interview, Lovis was asked to provide Zuriel Recruitment with her personal details, including a photocopy of her passport, her home address, mobile number and bank account details. Her interviewer (a SPAC Nation pastor) concluded by encouraging her to attend SPAC services. Several months later she moved into what the church calls a ‘TRAP house’ run by Pastor Samuel Akokhia. In March 2019, Lovis discovered a four-year loan

for £5,000 had been taken out in her name, but instead of going to her, the money had been transferred to a company called ER Management Group, run and owned by Emmanuel Akokhia, Pastor Samuel’s brother. When Lovis confronted

a senior pastor about the loan, she was told it was “for the greater good” and that “they were going to use the money to buy a bigger TRAP house to accommodate more people”.

A ‘trap house’ in street slang is a house where drugs are sold. There is no suggestion that SPAC is involved in drug dealing, but they appear to employ street slang in order to appeal to young people from vulnerable backgrounds. SPAC Nation runs several TRAP houses, supposedly safe houses where young people wishing to leave a gang or who are otherwise vulnerable can seek refuge. A 16-year-old girl was allegedly sexually assaulted by a SPAC Nation member at one such TRAP house, and a video filmed at another house shows a SPAC pastor whipping a young man with a leather belt.

The Charity Commission recently opened an investigation into SPAC Nation’s safeguarding and finances, and the Metropolitan Police are reviewing allegations of possible fraud and other offences. SPAC Nation denied the allegations and told journalists the church had a “robust complaints procedure” and “a well-run disciplinary system”. Pastor Adegboyega has ignored requests for an interview. *huffingtonpost.co.uk*, 9 Nov; *BBC News*, 16 Dec; *thesun.co.uk*, 17 Dec 2019.

SWEDEN’S FAKE MAJOR

A Swedish man who worked for many years in military intelligence and for the defence group Saab, and who held senior military positions abroad, has been discovered to have falsified his academic credentials. His CV claims he graduated from the Signal Troops Officer College in Enköping in 1999, but the institution has no record of his ever having studied there. He had produced a forged diploma certificate signed with the name of a non-existent colonel.

The newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* investigated the man’s background, learning that he

had worked for two years as a security-classified manager at the Coast Guard without even studying at the university he stated in his CV.

Despite the Coast Guard having informed military and government officials of the deception, the man was chosen by the army to be Chief of Staff for Sweden’s UN force deployed in Mali, beginning his employment in autumn 2019, but was suspended before being posted abroad. Prior to this, however, the man held a captain’s rank in Kosovo, during the UN deployment there, and a major’s rank in Afghanistan. In this latter position he was responsible for the supervision of soldiers under his command and was also responsible for information security. The required qualifications for this position included a reserve officer degree and having studied at the National Defence College, both of which he lacked but falsely claimed. Between 2007 and 2010, and again in 2013, he worked for Sweden’s MUST (Militära underrättelse- och säkerhetstjänsten), the Military Intelligence and Security Service). There he developed systems for managing crypto keys, rendering defence telecommunications unreadable to foreign powers.

The army has launched an internal investigation to clarify what happened. “It was a series of unfortunate circumstances and I can only say that we unfortunately made mistakes on our part in connection with some of the employment,” said Carl-Axel Blomdahl, head of the investigation team. He emphasised how unusual the case was, denying there had been any threat to security: “We have not been able to establish that he posed a security risk in this way. On the contrary, he has been well acknowledged for all the services he has had in the Armed Forces.” The fake officer himself has turned down *Dagens Nyheter’s* request for an interview. *svt.se*, 13 Jan 2020.





NECROLOG

This month, an American daredevil falls to (a possibly flat) Earth, while one of the co-founders of the Findhorn community joins her beloved nature spirits



ABOVE LEFT: 'Mad' Mike Hughes finally came a cropper when his latest homemade rocket failed. ABOVE RIGHT: Findhorn pioneer Dorothy Maclean.

'MAD' MIKE HUGHES

American daredevil 'Mad' Mike Hughes died in February 2020 when his homemade rocket crashed as he attempted to propel himself one mile (5,300ft) high. Hughes was fired into the air aboard a steam-powered projectile which crashed back to Earth a few seconds later. A video of the ill-fated launch shows a parachute dangling behind the rocket, apparently deployed too early.

The two-month-old Mike Hughes was taken by his father to watch car races in Oklahoma City, and commenced racing motorcycles at the age of 12, turning professional at 18. Five years later he became the USA's number one Ice Speedway motorcycle racer. Moving to Las Vegas in 1994, he became a limousine driver and daredevil. In 2002 he made the *Guinness Book of Records* by jumping a Lincoln Town Car stretch limousine 103ft (31m) at the Perris Auto Speedway, California. This was the longest limousine ramp jump, beating a previous 75ft (23m) jump he had made in Las Vegas. The stunt severely injured his back when he crashed into a wall; a mountain of car tyres intended to cushion his landing had come apart. The next year,

he tried for a new record of 125ft (38m), covering his body in bubble wrap and driving a 3 ton (2,700kg) white Cadillac limousine up a ramp at 65mph (105kmh). The car flipped over before reaching a cushion of tyres but Hughes was unhurt.

As a self-taught engineer, Hughes constructed his first manned rocket in 2014, the 'X-2 SkyLimo'. He travelled a quarter of a mile (1,300ft) in it, reportedly collapsing afterwards and requiring several days' recovery time. In subsequent interviews, he proclaimed a desire to go into space to ascertain if it was the case that, as he believed, the Earth was flat. Whether he genuinely believed this or was merely saying so as a PR stunt is not clear. In 2018, he successfully launched himself in a rocket 1,875ft (570m) in the air, landing in the Mojave Desert [FT368:10].

His last and fatal launch was intended to be a trial run for something even more epic; he wanted to blast himself 62 miles (100km) into the air to the Karman Line, the border between the Earth's atmosphere and the beginning of space – where he had intended to gather evidence that the Earth is flat.

"Sometimes, I feel like the

cartoon character Wile E Coyote, when he suddenly runs off a cliff", Hughes once said. "But it's the price I pay for a life that's not boring."

Michael Hughes, racing motorcyclist and daredevil, born Oklahoma City, 9 Feb 1956; died Barstow, California, 22 Feb 2020, aged 64.

DOROTHY MACLEAN

Best known for having established the Findhorn Foundation spiritual community in Scotland together with co-founders Eileen and Peter Caddy, after taking a degree in business at the University of Western Ontario, Dorothy Maclean began working in New York as a secretary for covert intelligence organisation the British Security Coordination Service (BSC) during World War II. There, she met BSC officer John Wood, whom she married in 1941, and who introduced her to the teachings of Hazrat Inayat Khan, founder of the Sufi Order in the West. Moving to London with her husband, Dorothy joined a spiritual group established by self-styled 'sensitive' Sheena Govan. In 1954, Dorothy had her first mystical experience of "the God within", described by her as a "vast unity".

Sheena's behaviour became increasingly bizarre; she ordered Dorothy to clean her rooms, and told her then husband Peter Caddy, whom she had married in 1948, that she had received a spirit message saying she was no longer his "other half". Accordingly, he began a relationship with Eileen Combe, a married mother of five, who moved in with himself and Sheena. When Eileen became pregnant by Peter, Sheena announced that the child, born in 1955, belonged to her. Peter was exiled to Scotland and Eileen sent to live with Dorothy. After being reunited, the three adults and children moved to a primitive cottage on Scotland's Isle of Mull. In 1957, Peter became the manager of the Cluny Hill Hotel at Forres, near Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands. Dorothy became the hotel's receptionist and secretary. Making contact with a mothership from Venus, Eileen instructed Peter to clear a landing strip in the hotel grounds, an act which caused the hotel owner to fire them.

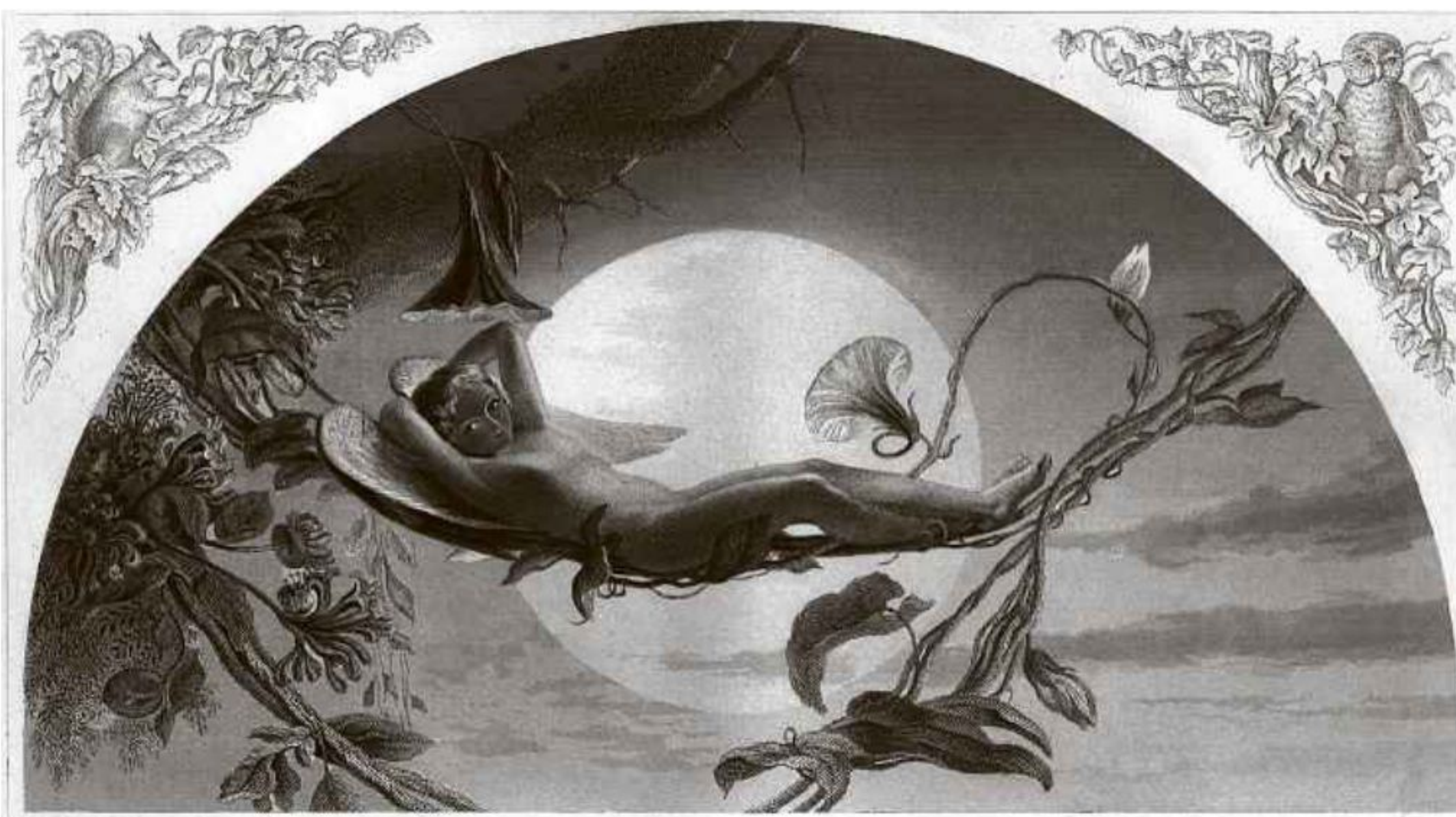
In 1962, following instructions from Eileen's 'inner voice', Peter, Eileen, their three children and Dorothy moved into a caravan at Findhorn Bay



Caravan Park, six miles (3.7km) north of Forres on the coast of the Moray Firth. Struggling for money and at times surviving on benefits, they began growing their own vegetables. Eileen Caddy continued to receive spirit messages, and Dorothy discovered an ability to communicate with nature spirits (or devas, a name and interpretation derived from the Theosophy movement), specifically those of vegetables. Soon, the local area was alive with stories of 40lb (18kg) cabbages, enormous broccoli, and winter-flowering roses. Visitors began arriving to see these wonders for themselves. By the late 1960s, the focus changed from vegetable cultivation to “growing people”, and so the Findhorn community began. The Findhorn Foundation was established as a trust and charity and bought up nearby land, purchasing the Cluny Hill Hotel which was to become Findhorn’s College. The community grew over the next 20 years to encompass around 300 members, with celebrity endorsement from Burt Lancaster, Hayley Mills, and Shirley Maclaine.

In 1973, together with other community members, Dorothy travelled to the USA where they established the Lorian Association, a spiritual education community based in Wisconsin and Washington State. Dorothy continued to publish books relating the messages she received from devas, angels and other spirits; her writings on the “intelligence of nature” displayed a concern for the environment and exemplified the ‘Gaian hypothesis’, the interconnectedness of everything in nature. “We are the skin of this world; take us away and the complete planet, no longer able to function, dries up and dies,” a Cypress tree deva had told her. For more on Findhorn, see Andy Roberts, “Saucers Over Findhorn”, **FT217:44-49**.

Dorothy Maclean, author and educator, born Guelph, Ontario, 7 Jan 1920; died Findhorn, Scotland, 13 Mar 2020, aged 100.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

FOLKLORE MULTIPLIED

I’m writing this in early April, and Covid-19 has spread its black wings over much of the world. As of this morning over 50,000 deaths have been recorded: though, given that Iran, Russia and particularly China are thought to have falsified their death figures, the real number is probably double that.

You, dear reader, are living, of course, in the future. By the time you look at these numbers later in April or even in early May, close to a fifth or a quarter of a million will have died. These deaths and the unprecedented lockdown in so many countries have created a unique environment in which urban legends have multiplied. The combination of anxiety and spare-time are to folklore what a toilet bowl in a warm bleachless house is to bacteria: the perfect breeding ground. There follows a sample of the narratives passing from mouth to mouth and from WhatsApp account to WhatsApp account: worthy successors, in their way, to such classics as the vanishing hitch-hiker and the naked birthday party.

There are, for instance, the yarns about patient zero who first brought the illness to a given country, town or region. In northern Italy, an asymptomatic Pakistani migrant delivering Chinese food was fingered by social media. There are stories about those who are ill: for instance, in some versions

(Italy again), special signs or marks of paint have been placed outside the houses of the infected.

There was the announcement in a neighbourhood in the UK that money carried the virus and that notes and coins should be left in an envelope on the doorstep, with bank details so the money could be

refunded electronically by the government. The crook who had created the announcement collected all the envelopes and disappeared into the night.

My favourite narrative to date seems to have originated in Spain before the lockdown was imposed there. A prostitute is infected and a doctor called. The doctor, recognising the symptoms of coronavirus, quarantines the brothel in which his patient is plying her trade along with everyone inside. The

result: most of the city council, including the mayor, find themselves locked in a house of ill repute for 30 days.

I have been struck in collecting these new legends by how many of them are publicised (and created?) by state actors. For instance, the Pakistani patient zero story had a basis in a real event, but was then manipulated into legendary material by a pro-Kremlin news agency. We are seeing not just the multiplication of folklore before our eyes, but also its weaponisation.

Simon Young’s new book *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies* is out now from Gibson Square.

MOST OF THE CITY
COUNCIL FIND
THEMSELVES
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REPUTE FOR 30
DAYS



Articles of faith

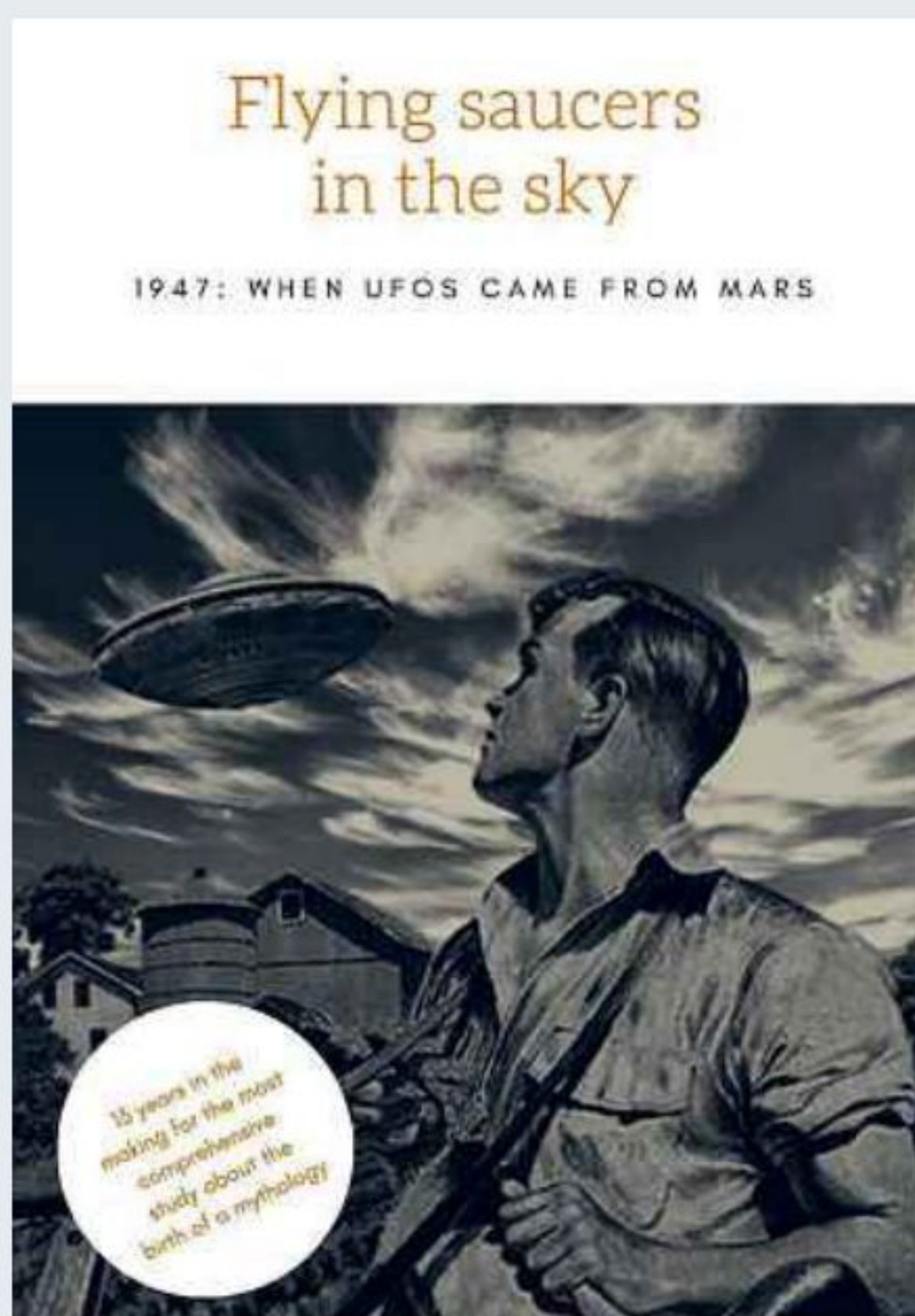
PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

WHAT MAKES A TRUE BELIEVER?

Long years ago, during a gathering of UFO cognoscenti at which I had made a presentation, I slipped outside to reduce the amount of blood in my nicotine stream, and perhaps reacquaint myself with the warming contents of my Dad's ancient, curved, silver hip-flask. As one does. Standing in the cold sunshine, I was unexpectedly approached by a fierce-looking person of the northern and female persuasion, which as fans of Ena Sharples will know can be a fearsome combination, who accosted me thus (imagine the Lancastrian accent): "It must be very strange to be an *expert* on something you've never *seen*."

There's nothing quite like the combination of relief and glee one feels on being confronted with something so easily dealt with: so in my most emollient tones I told her about my three UFO sightings: the Tsyklon/Cosmos 2238 re-entry of 31 March 1993 (spectacular, and most definitely unidentified by me, or friends in the Defence Research Agency, at the time); the odd craft that sailed over the state highway in front of me near Indian Springs AFB in 1981 or so (still unidentified); and the white circular thing that I saw float sedately under the 747 I was on, over the Atlantic on the way to Phoenix, AZ, date now vague, which I suspect was a weather balloon. She had the good grace to hear me out, but stalked off clearly less than satisfied. Her own odd experience had involved being trailed by an enormous UFO for some miles while driving near Manchester at night. I didn't get – or make – the opportunity to ask if she'd checked the position of the Moon at the time, which I rather regret. I strongly suspect that she had made no such effort.

I draw two thoughts from this curious encounter. One is that the lady was irremediably convinced that she's seen something otherworldly and was in no mood, then or later, to look for any other explanation. The other, quite common among UFO witnesses, is the import of her opening gambit: that you don't know diddly-squat or even jack-shit about UFOs unless you've clapped eyes on one (or more) yourself. It's not my business to try to convince that first class of true believers that they're wrong: but it's worth pointing out to everyone else that it ain't necessarily so. I won't name names, for fear of inadvertently and invidiously omitting some distinguished individuals; nonetheless, and for the record, there's no shortage of eminent ufologists who've produced some notably insightful



commentary on the subject without having had the pleasure of a sighting of something inexplicable – or at least, inexplicable to them. More to my point, though, is the gnashing-on of both species of believer to these articles of faith, and the tendency (it's not universal) to presume without much further ado that whatever they saw came from outer space and was 'intelligently directed' by otherworldly beings. And this I do find genuinely puzzling. It becomes more so when one of these characters proclaims that he's insisting on the veridicality of his assessment 'to get the word out'. The word's been out, one way or another, for seven decades, and the mountains of testimony still don't amount to proof of any of the exotic theories of the origin of UFOs. John Rimmer, greatly esteemed co-founder of *Magonia*, wrote recently that "simply by definition, UFOs *are* real; it's what causes them to be seen that's the important stuff!" In my translation, that means the real mystery resides in people, not the stars.

BIGELOW, BIGLY, AND OTHER STUFF

Those of you intrigued by the role played by property billionaire Robert Bigelow in the AAWSA/AATIP/TSAAS saga – not to mention the odd part played by MUFON, and the dubious properties of the Skinwalker Ranch – will find much to reward you on Curt Collins's Blue Blurry Lines blog. In a scything two-parter compiled with Roger Glassel, and with the help of a couple of pseudonymous whistle-blowers, Collins has unravelled a fair chunk of the tangled web that links

LEFT: Is this the best UFO book (so far, at least) of the 21st century?

this alphabet soup. It's a complicated tale, which I won't even attempt to précis here, and it doesn't cast any of the participants in a particularly flattering light – though it is certainly illuminating. The unfortunate Luis Elizondo is pretty much exposed as a paper-shuffler, not really in charge of anything. As Robert Sheaffer remarked, this "calls to mind a certain ufologist from the UK, who claims to have run its 'UFO investigation programme,' which turns out was also a part-time 'desk' collecting reports, and not an actual programme." Who could he possibly mean?

Elsewhere in the blogosphere, I commend Jack Brewer's review of Sarah Scoles's *They Are Already Here*, on the UFO Trail. This looks like a book to be paying money for. Also: Jenny Randles's review, on the *Magonia* page (pelicanist.blogspot.com) of Maurizio Verga's *Flying Saucers in the Sky*, a dissection of everything that happened (in the sky) in 1947. Jenny thinks this is the best UFO book of the century. Well, we'll see about that in 80 years' time; meanwhile, the book should be read, by the sound of it, no matter the fixity of one's opinions (see above).

BELGIAN BLAME GAME

You get an outbreak of some illness, and in roughly ascending order some goon would say it's the fault of smokers, climate change, or the Jews. Now it's the dreaded coronavirus, which has just been fingered for a spate of UFO sightings in Belgium. To blame any virus for a bunch of UFO sightings is unexpected, although this one's not entirely irrational. According to the *Daily Telegraph*: "Frederick Delaere, the coordinator of the Belgian UFO Reporting Centre, said Belgium's imposition of lockdown measures to fight the coronavirus was likely to be responsible.

'We suspect that the clear weather of the past few days and the Covid-19 measures have caused this strong increase,' he told the *Telegraph*.

'Hundreds of thousands of Belgian citizens are currently at home in lockdown because of the crisis and are probably looking more at the sky.'

Delaere reckoned that Belgians were seeing flybys of Elon Musk's Starlink satellites. Possible, indeed. But why Belgians, we wonder. But then, why not?



A sprinkling of star dust

JENNY RANGLES recalls cases where UFO encounters triggered virus-like symptoms in witnesses

As I write in late March the world is in lockdown, wondering if a sore throat is more than it seems. I've had one since I sat behind a man coughing on the bus and was left wondering if he carried the coronavirus. Two weeks on, I've had only minor symptoms: it was probably just a cold, but I remain in NHS-ordered isolation, experiencing a way of life few of us have known in peacetime.

Despite the seriousness of the global situation, which has even seen space missions put on hold for fear of exporting Covid-19 to 'other worlds', wild speculation has mounted that the virus might have originated from somewhere other than a Wuhan market.

Aliens, of course, are in the mix for some. Well known cases of 'space sickness' have seen sudden onset illnesses following on from close encounters. Usually, such cases are assumed to be due to some kind of energy or radiation emitted by whatever triggered the incident. Far more likely is an indirect correlation between a strange event and a pre-existing medical condition, or that these symptoms are stress-related; even a misperception of a UFO can be a trigger.

Yet there are still some interesting UFO puzzles. One case occurred on 27 January 1997 and only came to light as a result of Ministry of Defence file releases, because the witness reported it to the police and not the media or ufologists.

It occurred on the B4560 in rural Powys, Wales. It was one of 12 cases reported to the MoD over a 72-hour period, none of which reached UFO groups. Indeed, a few hours earlier a man in Droylsden, Manchester, contacted police to report a 'cruise missile' in busy airspace in broad daylight. Needless to say, the police assumed it was just a plane.

But that evening at around 10.40pm a Newport man was driving just south of Llangynidr on a quiet back road when he observed a 'massive star' moving towards him. Curious, he stopped, switched the headlights off and got out to observe it. The glowing tube of smoky grey/blue light descended and then encircled the car. The strange glow hovered around for what he estimated was five minutes. Most remarkably, as this was happening the witness was able to walk through the very bright 'misty cloud', but he heard no sound associated with the object. He reported feeling very frightened at this time.

When the thing first appeared his car radio



started to malfunction and then 'failed', and he was unable to use his mobile to call for help (though 23 years ago rural cell phone coverage was not as it is today). After the glow vanished, he drove home feeling unwell and was actually sick on arrival. He also seems to have developed a skin rash the following morning, when he was still feeling poorly. This is when he decided, while hoping the symptoms would clear, to report the event by phone to police at Ebbw Vale; from there, the case reached the MoD in London, but seems not to have been followed up. Yet this is exactly the kind of case you'd hope the MoD would investigate.

We presume the witness recovered, but we may never know – unless he is reading this magazine: if so, please contact us now, as this incident has parallels in the UFO literature that deserve better follow-through than it got 23 years ago.

There is another aspect that the MoD could have studied: after the witness walked through the glow, it disappeared – but his vehicle was covered in a coating of dust of unknown origin. Was it just debris already present from his winter drive? Perhaps. But this feature has cropped up in other encounters and is commonly linked with illness cases, something random witnesses are unlikely to know. Indeed, there is a pattern to these reports that suggests some kind of unknown atmospheric phenomenon may trigger or spread illnesses.

The best known case occurred on the night of 20-21 January 1988 on the long highway skirting Australia's southern coast where a family of four were doing the epic drive from Perth to Melbourne. Much as in Powys nine years later, a glowing fuzzy light encircled the car, but was said to have 'sucked' it off the road. Again, it deposited dusty ash onto the bodywork, left a skin condition on the hand of one witness and left them all feeling ill and shaken (see **FT193:29; 240:43**). The parallels between these cases are interesting enough to make

us wonder if there might be some kind of as yet unresolved phenomenon behind both instances. I have been using my isolation to draw up a list of cases that reveal interesting patterns. Here are a few brief examples:

June 1977: As rain poured down near the village of Lartington, Durham, a car driver and a motorcyclist both saw a purple glow that appeared to 'pull' them up a hill. The motorcyclist was left feeling ill and with sunburn-like marks on his exposed skin. The car driver was never traced, but I kept in touch with the motorcyclist, who had subsequent health issues that he happily overcame.

September 1977: a couple renovating an old building in Newmill, Cornwall, were heading out for the night when a hazy green ball of mist appeared and moved towards the young woman who had gone ahead. It came very close to her and she fled indoors. Her partner went out and saw it only as it was moving away, so never got very close. Other locals viewed it from a greater distance and suffered no effects, but the couple fell ill with virus-like symptoms: headaches, muscle aches and being sick. Both were tested in hospital – the woman even undergoing exploratory surgery – but no cause was ever found for their illness.

August 1978: A Scottish ex-pat couple living in a beautiful mountain retreat in Ibiza were woken at 2.30am by a strange noise filling the bedroom. Outside, an orange mist was on the rock-strewn slopes and seemed to be moving upward and away from their home. The sound was emanating from it and boring into their skulls. A few seconds later, the glow climbed off the hill and vanished, as did the noise. Next morning, the couple awoke with headaches and that persisted for some time.

These are just three cases from many in my records describing strange mists or glows that come down into proximity with people and seem to trigger almost immediate ill-effects. While these are almost certainly not cases of alien craft seeding viruses to Earth, they do constitute a most unusual phenomenon. We need to look at these cases with the help of scientists and ask why they are triggering what resembles a virus. Are the effects physiological or psychological, and what is the cause of these strange events?

If any readers have other examples from their own files or indeed from the annals of fortan history I would be most interested to hear from you at: nufonnews@gmail.com.

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

FORTEAN TIMES BRINGS YOU THE NEWS THAT TIME FORGOT


78 VANISHED FROM THE FACE OF THE EARTH

THEO PAIJMANS traces the meme-like spread of tales of mysterious disappearances

THE SUNDAY TELEGRAPH, NEW YORK, DECEMBER 25, 1904.

THE MAN WHO DISAPPEARED

BY IRVING LEWIS.



Young Lerch Left a Christmas Eve Gathering, Walked in the Snow for a Few Paces and Then Vanished, Leaving Only Some Footprints and a Still Small Voice to Guide His Mystified Friends

and children, amid the Lerch home, which was a grand old house standing on a small hill with its side to the old road crossing from Elkhart to Chicago. The Lerch family consisted of Mr. Lerch, his wife and five children. One of the latter was Oliver Lerch, 20 years old, who was named after the founder of the town, a distant relative of young Lerch's mother. Among the guests was the Rev. Marshall Adams Hallock, a Methodist preacher, who was born and "raised" in Elkhart, Ind., and was a descendant of one of the old Huguenot families which settled this section. The Rev. Mr. Hallock had retired from the pulpit two years previous to the incident now being related. He had been a member of the church since 1880, and was a member of the Lerch household. Mr. Hallock is a man of high character and much for the trust of the story of the disappearance of young Lerch.

The Rev. Mr. Hallock is now living on Harrison street in Elkhart, Ind., where he recently talked about the Lerch mystery.

Another man who attended the Christmas Eve party at the Lerch house was William H. H. Hadden, whose father was elected Governor of the Hoosier State the year that Gen. William Henry Harrison was elected President. Mr. Hadden, now well advanced in years, is a practicing lawyer, with an office in the Standard Building, Chicago, and occupies the tenth of the Lerch estate. With a third witness in Mrs. Henry Caldwell, whose husband was a Kentuckian. This woman, now a widow, is living with her son, Clay D. Caldwell, in Elkhart, Elkhart County, Ind., where the man is prominent in politics, having held the office of county clerk for many years, and having served as a Presidential elector on the McKinley ticket in 1900.


Oliver Lerch, at 10:30, when the evening of the party was told by his father to take a bucket and fill it at a well about twenty-five yards from the house, down the slope and to the rear. A heavy snow

fell, and the Lerch family, which was a grand old house standing on a small hill with its side to the old road crossing from Elkhart to Chicago. The Lerch family consisted of Mr. Lerch, his wife and five children. One of the latter was Oliver Lerch, 20 years old, who was named after the founder of the town, a distant relative of young Lerch's mother. Among the guests was the Rev. Marshall Adams Hallock, a Methodist preacher, who was born and "raised" in Elkhart, Ind., and was a descendant of one of the old Huguenot families which settled this section. The Rev. Mr. Hallock had retired from the pulpit two years previous to the incident now being related. He had been a member of the church since 1880, and was a member of the Lerch household. Mr. Hallock is a man of high character and much for the trust of the story of the disappearance of young Lerch.

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Oliver Lerch, at 10:30, when the evening of the party was told by his father to take a bucket and fill it at a well about twenty-five yards from the house, down the slope and to the rear. A heavy snow



Mr. Lerch and Three of the Boulder Men Stood Their Ground.

Oliver Lerch, at 10:30, when the evening of the party was told by his father to take a bucket and fill it at a well about twenty-five yards from the house, down the slope and to the rear. A heavy snow

A single newspaper article published in 1888 launched one of the most persistent myths in forteana: that there are instances in which persons literally vanished from the face of the Earth. A quarter of a century later, its author, American journalist and writer Ambrose Bierce, mysteriously disappeared.

One day in July 1854 Orion Williamson went missing while crossing a field near Selma, Alabama. A similar fate met James Burne Worson, a shoemaker from Leamington, Warwickshire, running along a road: "He did not fall to the earth – he vanished before touching it. No trace of him was ever afterward discovered." On the evening of 9 November at about 9pm, young Charles Ashmore, living near Quincy, Illinois, vanished. He left the farmhouse to get water from a well at some distance, but did not return. His worried family found a trail in the snow that stopped abruptly. For months his mother and other family members heard his voice near the well. "The intervals of silence grew longer and longer, the voice fainter and farther, and by midsummer was heard no more."¹ Bierce included these three cases in his article. We know that he is pulling our

"He did not fall to the earth – he vanished before touching it. No trace of him was ever afterward discovered."

legs as none of the persons existed, but the anecdotes were convincingly written, and the novel vanishings struck a nerve. Bierce had started a meme.

As early as the following year, Ashmore's disappearance was being presented as fact.² In 1890, a newspaper from Quincy, Illinois, the town near which Ashmore had allegedly lived, asked its readers if anyone remembered the case.³ Between 1901 and 1904 several American and Canadian newspapers relocated Ashmore's disappearance to England, somewhere between Bramber and Steyning, for reasons unknown.⁴

Bierce's stories were so evocative that they became templates for other equally famous vanishing tales. The best known is the mysterious disappearance of Oliver Lerch. The story is modelled after that of Charles Ashmore, having all the familiar ingredients: a house, a distant well, night, snowfall and a trail that ends suddenly. Written by journalist

and newspaper editor Irving Lewis, it was published in 1904 in a New York newspaper.⁵

Lewis's hoax was so successful that it began to lead a life of its own in countless papers and magazines, even a few Austrian ones in the 1930s,⁶ and continues to appear in books and websites to this day. The Lerch story also spawned a variation: a letter to a 1967 South Bend newspaper claimed that the story had been around "a long time": "as a small child my mother told me a similar story, the difference being that the victim was a little girl instead of Oliver Lerch. Who told my mother the story, it never occurred to question. As she told it, the little girl went for water at the well on a moonlit night. When her cries of distress were heard, her tracks were followed until they ended in the snow. The wooden water bucket was found there, but the little girl was never seen again; the supposition being that a giant bird had carried her away."⁷

David Lang, a farmer who

disappeared at Gallatin, Tennessee, is another famous variation on Bierce's Williamson vanishing story. Lang also disappeared while crossing a field, and his voice too was heard in the following months. The story was penned by mystery writer Stuart Palmer. It gained some credence because it was published in 1953 in *Fate*,⁸ but Palmer had sold the same story twice. The original source was a 1930 edition of *Ghost Stories*,⁹ a pulp magazine that offered a mix of ghostly fiction and 'true' supernatural experiences. Palmer had been its one-time editor (see FT18:67, 334:32).¹⁰

The vanishings of Martin Spangler and Charlotte Ashton are further variations on Bierce's stories. Spangler was an English schoolmaster from Lancashire, said to have mysteriously vanished in 1911, in plain sight of his wife and daughter, while crossing a field. His voice was somehow heard in the field, but a hole dug to a depth of over 15ft (4.6m) revealed nothing.¹¹ Charlotte Ashton mysteriously disappeared from her farm near London on 17 October 1876. The elements of her story are recognisable. It is night; a bucket of water is needed from the well outside; 16-year-old Charlotte volunteers to fetch it. She doesn't return. The search party finds her footprints in the snow, where they abruptly stop, but no trace of the girl. Around noon, her voice is suddenly heard: "Father! I can see you! Can't you see me? The voice seemed to echo from the interior of the well, but in the next moment it was coming from the branch of a nearby tree. Seconds later it was coming from a cracked boulder. "Please help me!" Charlotte begged. "I can't find my way back! The opening – it's disappeared!" The next four days the voice moved about

the farm, the intervals growing longer and the voice fainter. Eleven days after Charlotte's mysterious disappearance, her voice ceased forever.¹²

In 1901 one Zeb Todd opined that cases of the mysteriously missing begged for a thorough investigation, introducing two variant tales himself. In 1896 Todd was in St Louis, he wrote, visiting an old friend who had broken his leg and was bedridden. One day, when the doctor was present, the convalescent friend began breathing heavily. The doctor immediately went to the bed, but: "Ere he reached it, he cried 'Great God! What has become of Smith?' The bed we found was empty, the doctor threw back the coverings, we found nothing between the sheets but Smith's nightshirt and the splints... Smith had utterly disappeared from the room and has never to this day been heard of or seen by mortal man."

Todd also added a new variant of Charles Ashmore's vanishing, featuring farmer Stephen Gaines, his wife, and three children living near Circleville, Ohio. Again, there's a congregation inside a house and a task that needs doing outside: On 29 December 1888 at about three 'o'clock in the afternoon, the eldest boy was sent to the woodpile. The boy didn't return, and a search began. Footsteps were found in the snow, but, "they ceased suddenly and inexplicably in the midst of a perfectly open space". The boy's clothing was found, "yet the most careful

examination revealed nothing of the lad... The clothing... was buttoned, the shoes laced and tied, while the whole mass seemed to have simply slipped off as the body vanished into vapor. Mr Gaines informed me only last month... that he had never heard of the boy since and could not account for the strange disappearance"¹³

What explanation did Bierce have for the three vanishings he had made up, but that felt so alarmingly real? He claimed that a book by a Dr Hern of Leipzig, entitled *Verschwinden und Seine Theorie* ("Disappearance and its Theory") held the answer. "Dr Hern believes that in the visible world there are void places – *vacuua*, and something more – holes, as it were, through which animate and inanimate objects may fall into the invisible world and be seen and heard no more." The unlucky person who tumbled into such a cavity would meet a terrible fate: "A man enclosed in such a closet could neither see nor be seen; neither hear or be heard; neither feel or be felt; neither live nor die..."¹⁴

A precursor to Hern's 'theory' emerged in 1881: "A correspondent of a Paris paper discussing mysterious disappearances, which occur in all large cities, starts a curious and somewhat startling theory. He holds that death frequently involves actual dissolution, a

sort of vanishing into thin air... Furthermore, he claims to have been a witness to one of these phenomenal disappearances. He was out walking with a friend... when instantaneously his companion vanished, and from that hour to the present time has never reappeared."¹⁵

The story was rehashed in 1890, with a new detail added: when the friend disappeared, a strong sulphurous odour was noticed.¹⁶

A year later a reporter writing an article about missing railway coaches asked a newspaper's readers: "...do they drop into cosmic holes along with the pins and jack-knives of a very careless world?"¹⁷

By far the most creative variant of Bierce's three stories was published in a Pennsylvania paper in 1969, in an article that also mentions the mysterious disappearance of "Oliver Larch" (sic).

Three years before, the article claimed, a woman was hanging out clothes in her Brooklyn backyard. "A shirt became snagged on the top of a very tall clothesline pole, and she sent her husband up to get the shirt. The husband climbed the pole and called to his wife to say that the shirt had been caught on a nail. He reached for the shirt, and as his wife watched, his hand seemed to disappear into nothingness. Then the whole man vanished, as if sucked up into an invisible nothing." The woman reported the incident to the police, but

they scoffed at her. She became convinced that her husband had become a victim of "a mystery of natural forces, invisible dimensions in the atmosphere... she said a neighbour had told her of strange phenomena such as this."¹⁸

These stories were not always believed. Zeb Todd, for instance, was taken to task by an Ohio editor for having stolen the stories, pointing out that they were "a clear plagiarism of a story by Ambrose Bierce, of California".¹⁹

In the end, are only fevered imagination, sly journalism and literary thievery involved? In 1873, Anna and Thomas Cumpston might have disagreed. The English couple had booked a room at the Victoria Hotel at Temple Gate in Bristol. At four 'o'clock they were alarmed by terrible noises which they "could not explain and which frightened them very much. The bed seemed to open, and did all sorts of strange things. The floor, too, opened and they heard voices. They were so frightened that they opened their bedroom window and leapt out."²⁰

Another mystery emerges in charting these vanishings. Bierce wrote of a Doctor Hern of Leipzig. We wonder what an account published four years before Bierce mentioned the German doctor signifies.²¹ In it, we learn that one Maximilian Hern had published his book, *Verschwinden und seine Theorie*, and we come full circle. To this day, not a trace of the professor or his book has been found.



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3 'Who remembers the Case?', *The Quincy Whig*, Quincy, IL, 28 May 1890.

4 'Vanished And Left No Trace', *Chicago Tribune*, 10 Feb 1901. The article was published dozens of times between 1901 and 1904, the last being 'Many Lost in London', *Tri-city Star*, Davenport, IA, 19 Sept 1904.

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15 'Mysterious Disappearances' *Boston Weekly Globe*, 15 June 1881. Also published in a number of American newspapers and one Australian newspaper in June 1881.

16 'Persons that turn to Air', *St Louis Republic*, St Louis, MO. It was republished in newspapers in Wisconsin, Kansas and California between May and July 1890.

17 'Where Cars go To. Sometimes They seem to vanish From the Earth', *Boston Weekly Globe*, Boston, 10 Mar 1891. The article was republished in newspapers in Pennsylvania, Missouri, Tennessee, Maryland and

New York between April and May 1891. See note 24.

18 Hazel I Diaz Pumara, *Williamsport Sunday Grit National Edition*, Williamsport, PA, 26 Jan 1969. Pumara doesn't mention any source for the Brooklyn account. She also wrote for *Occult* and the *Journal of Borderland Research*.

19 'Zeb Todd. Passes off Stolen Stories on the Editor', *Chillicothe Gazette*, Chillicothe, OH, 2 Mar 1901.

20 'Extraordinary Hallucination', *Times*, 11 Dec 1873. See **FT380:11**.

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MARKS OF THE WITCH

BRITAIN'S RITUAL PROTECTION SYMBOLS

'Witch mark' is a term popularly used to describe a range of ritual protection symbols found in churches, grand buildings and caves. **DAVID CLARKE** visits an ice age site where a huge concentration of magical graffiti was recently discovered.

My first visit to Creswell Crag, on the border between Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, was an excursion with my primary school during the 1970s. We scampered around the limestone gorge and entrances to dark caves that dotted the escarpment alongside a lake. Their names – Robin Hood's Cave, Pin Hole, Church Hole and Mother Grundy's Parlour, the latter reputedly the former home of a witch – were exotic and mysterious. In the Visitor's Centre were images of cavemen and long extinct animals such as the woolly mammoth that shared this harsh landscape with prehistoric hunter-gatherers during the last great Ice Age.

30 years later, a team of archaeologists discovered previously unknown Ice Age art on the walls of the caves. Before this find, prehistorians believed such magnificent art was confined to continental European examples such as the stunning paintings of extinct animals on the walls at Lascaux in the Dordogne region of southwest France. Britain's cave art has taken longer to give up its secrets. When it did, the treasures included ritual images not only from the Ice Age but spanning a vast period of prehistory and history. In 2004, Paul Bahn and Paul Pettit visited the Creswell caves early one April morning, urged on by one of the guides, just as the sunlight was streaming into the entrance of Church Hole. Through a combination of "luck and skill" they identified a panel of engravings depicting birds and at least 13 other animal figures in three of the caves.¹ Their discovery of the first cave art in Britain made international headlines, but one puzzle remained: how was it that images of stag, bison and birds hunted by our ancestors between 40-28,000 years ago had been completely missed by the Victorian excavators who had found extensive evidence of human occupation, including



LEFT: The marks were ignored for years because of their ubiquity. OPPOSITE: Exploring the caves.

A fresh discovery inside the caves overturned all previous ideas

some striking portable art carved in bone?

Creswell Crag have been visited by modern humans – and Neanderthals before them – since the Late Middle Palaeolithic – some 60-40,000 years ago. Groups of *Homo sapiens* left evidence of their tools and hunting expeditions in the caves from 29,000 years ago.² Much nearer our own time, during the Middle Ages, a small hamlet and a mill appeared at the west end of the gorge. It was villagers from here, along with early modern tourists, who left extensive evidence of their presence. On close examination, the caves are full of graffiti. Initials and dates of visitors are scratched, inscribed and cut into the walls, dating from many different centuries. Until recently, they were ignored because of their ubiquity.

The early mediæval villagers left no written records, but a fresh discovery

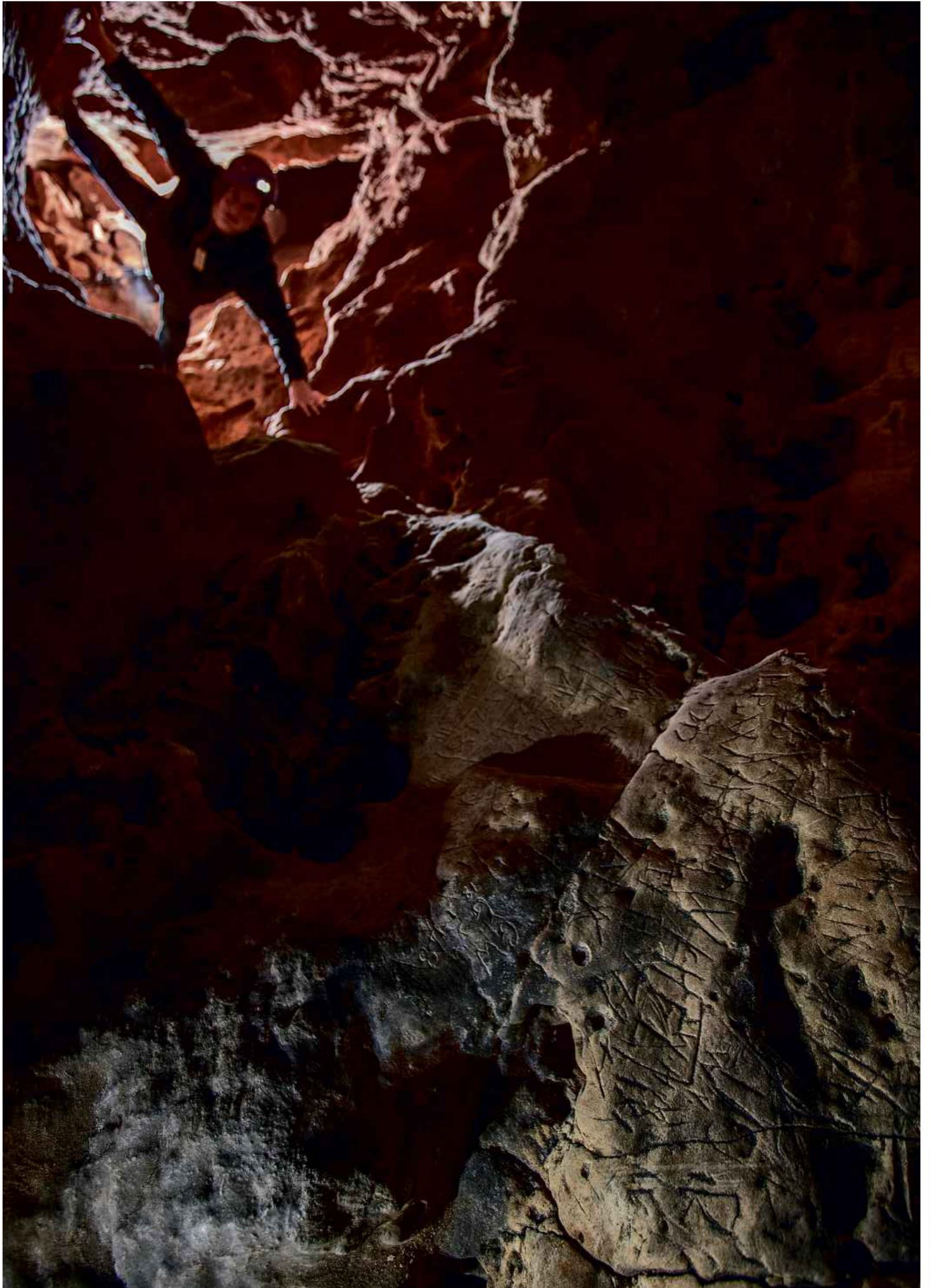
inside the caves overturned all previous ideas about the complex. Entrances to caves are always significant in folklore and required special protection. Dark and forbidding, they were hiding places for dangerous animals and outlaws – which explains the naming of Robin Hood's Cave or Hall, the largest cave on the crags and the longest to hold onto its secrets. In the mediæval period the presence of bats and inexplicable

draughts linked them with the abode of demons.³

EXPLORING THE CAVES

Early in 2019, I was invited to return to Creswell Crag for a third time, in my role as a folklorist representing the new Centre for Contemporary Legend at Sheffield Hallam University. I was keen to examine what press accounts had called 'the entrance to Hell', a difficult-to-access area of the cave that is decorated with mysterious apotropaic marks (see FT378:4-5). The word apotropaic is from the Greek *apotropaïos*, meaning 'to turn away'. Wearing a hard hat with a caving lamp, a guide led me into one of the four main chambers deep inside Robin Hood's Cave. The cave lies on the south facing cliff near the centre of the gorge and extends into the limestone for about 50 metres. In the darkness our lamps flickered across the dank walls. As our eyes adjusted we could see initials and dates inscribed by earlier visitors. In the middle of one cluster, 1718 and 1720 were visible and then, deeper into the cave, another from 1505.

"We don't normally allow visitors into this part of the cave because it is so cramped," said guide Kat Middleton. "But if we crawl under the barrier beyond where the official tours end you will see something interesting."



CHARLOTTE GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY



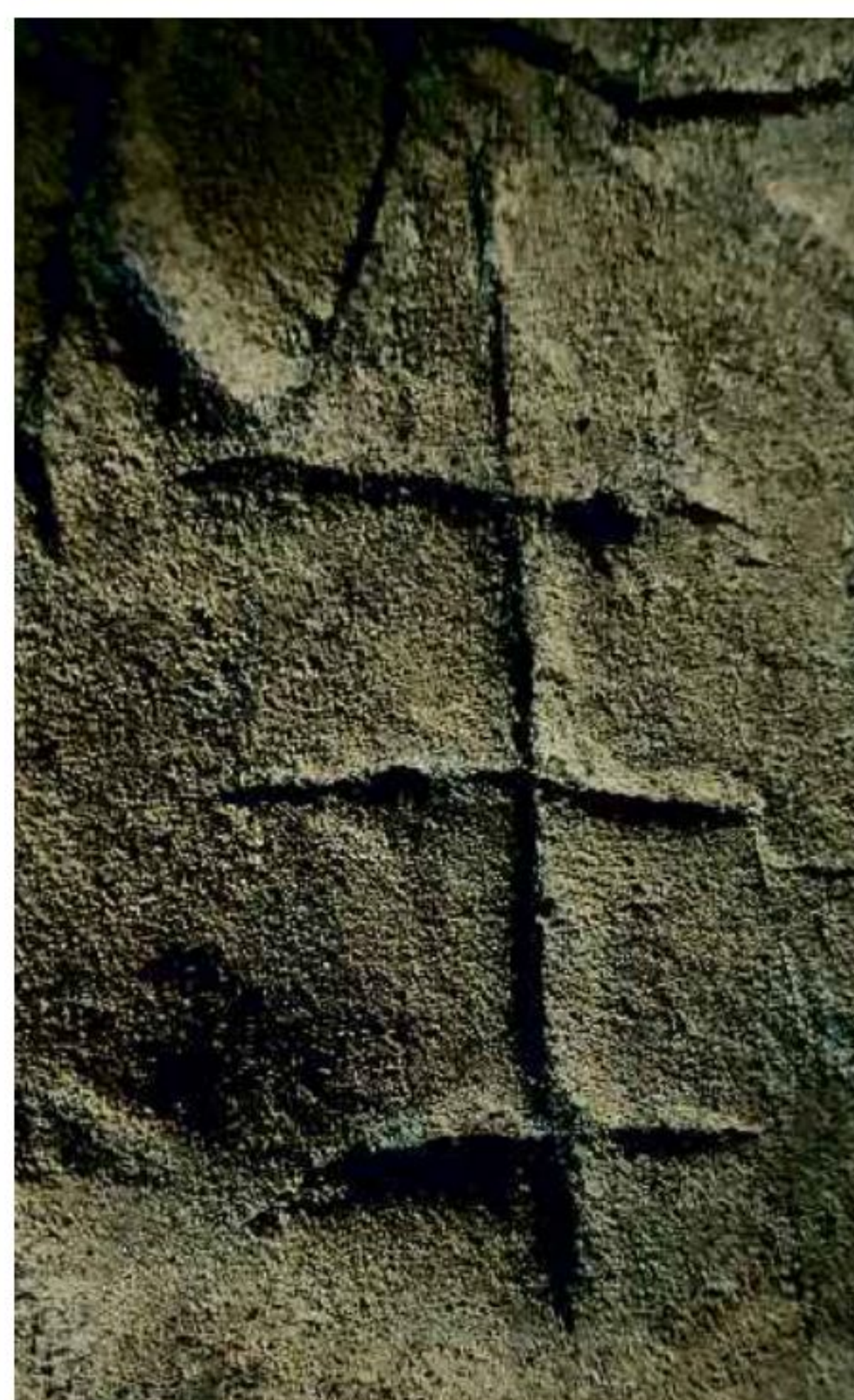
ABOVE LEFT: The caves contain a wealth of inscribed symbols. ABOVE RIGHT: One of the 'Marian marks'. BELOW: A three-pronged mark "like a cricket stump".

That was an understatement. Once we had negotiated a metal fence we entered the deepest section of the cave where, to the right, a gaping chasm dropped away into the depths of the earth. Shining our torches just above the deep hole, we could make out a frieze of unusual carvings that framed the limestone wall. It was covered with ritual protection marks, or 'witch-marks' as they have become known.

Up close, the marks resolved into a series of overlapping Vs or Ws. These were made to call upon the protection of the Virgin Mary. Sitting alongside the so-called 'Marian marks' were 'PM', *Pace Maria*, along with numerous crosses and the letters 'IX' (see panel for a discussion of the four most common variants). These marks are distinct from the Ice Age art found elsewhere in the cave complex and date from the early modern period when the gorge was inhabited by superstitious Christians. In addition, Robin Hood's Cave also contains more unusual symbols, including a three-pronged mark "like a cricket stump" and the repeated letters R and T. Other symbols include diagonal lines, boxes and mazes that may be devices for capturing or trapping spirits. Some appear to have been added to over time, perhaps reflecting a need to strengthen protection in response to new threats.

As Owen Davies and Ceri Houlbrook point out, the term 'witch mark' used to describe such carvings has become widespread, although there is no direct evidence that they were concerned with averting witchcraft and "they may have had a more generic protective function".⁴ 'Witch mark' is also used to describe marks that were found on the bodies of those accused during the witch-hunts. Clearly the marks at Creswell Crags and elsewhere were not made by those accused of witchcraft. Folklorists

"The marks may have had a more generic protective function"

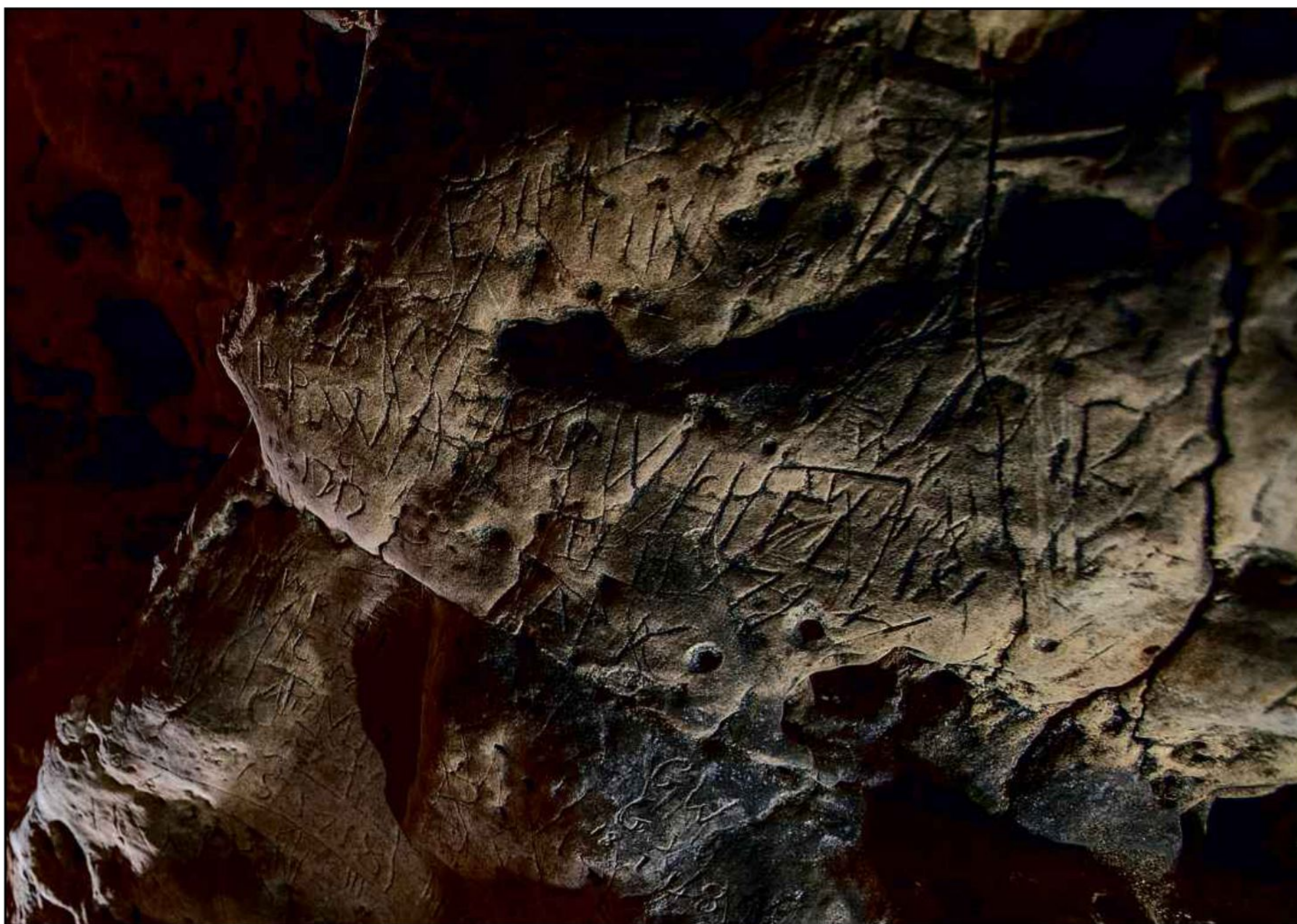


and historians refer to them collectively as 'ritual protection marks'. Little is known about their purpose and function but they were produced by people who wished to shield themselves from a range of malevolent supernatural powers.

MULTIPLE MARKS

The marks at Creswell were hiding in plain sight until a visit in the autumn of 2018 by two keen 'witch mark' hunters. The more they looked, the more they found. Soon it became obvious there were thousands of marks – "too numerous to count" – covering almost every part of the walls in two of the caves. Creswell now has the largest number so far identified in the British Isles, with a concentration directly over the chasm in Robin Hood's Cave. Access to the decorated caves has been enhanced by a collaboration with artist Jeremy Lee, a colleague from Sheffield Hallam University, who has used LIDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) scanning technology, more commonly used in surveying and to document crime scenes, to produce a 3D visualisation. The new technique allows visitors to explore the interior of the cave and examine the many scratches and carvings via a computer screen.⁵

The sheer number of ritual protection marks at Creswell has been described as "hugely important and the largest assemblage ever found in British caves" by Professor Ronald Hutton, one of the UK's leading authorities on folklore. Previously the record was held by a cave complex in the Mendip hills of Somerset where a group of 50 were recorded in 2007 in an area of Wookey Hole caves known as The Witch's Chimney. They lie close to The Witch of Wookey, a large stalagmite that was first mentioned in a written account dated 1628. In the same century, one local writer described how cattle that fed in the pastures through which the River Axe ran after its resurgence from the caves, had died suddenly after floods. He attributed this to the high concentration of lead in the area, but Linda Wilson notes that "it is easy to see how, in such deeply superstitious times, such



CHARLOTTE GRAHAM PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE: The Creswell Crags witch marks may represent the biggest collection of apotropaic marks in one place in the whole of the UK.

unexplained cattle deaths could well have been taken as evidence of the association of the cave with various forces of evil that were believed to play a large part in visiting trials and tribulations on the world.”⁶

Creswell guide John Charlesworth offers similar ideas as to why so many protective marks cluster in Robin Hood’s Cave. “There may have been a draft blowing through the cave at this point and evil spirits are supposed to follow flows of air, so it could be this that concerned them,” he said. Linda Wilson’s team identified a similar phenomenon during their expeditions into the caves at the Cheddar Gorge. At the Witch’s Chimney a cold convection draught can be detected by visitors, “quickly chilling anyone standing in there for any length of time”. In folklore, inexplicable blasts of this type were associated with paths used by spirits and fairies and required special magic to neutralise their uncanny presence.

John also believes the markings may have been necessary to protect the residents of the gorge from infant mortality and outbreaks of disease and pestilence: “They might want to do something practical and drive what they believed to be the source of the evil down into the furthest recesses of the darkest part of this cave in order to

trap it there.” While there are few surviving traditions of this type in the Midlands, the late Theo Brown, a folklorist from Devon, found examples in the folklore of southwest England. In her own study, Linda Wilson also quotes a 19th century poem that refers to the banishing of troublesome spirits into the cave of Wookey Hole:

*If then it return, you must pray and
command,
By midnight, By moonlight,
By Death’s ebon wand,
That to Cheddar Cliffs now, it departeth in
peace
And another seven years its sore troubling
will cease.*

If, after seven years, the evil returned, more elaborate rituals were required to deal with it. Local cunning folk or a group of clergy gathered and the spirit was called out. It could be set a task that would occupy it for eternity, such as emptying a lake with a thimble. Alternatively, a final option might be cast it into the Red Sea, a place associated with the drowning of Pharaoh’s army and symbolic of the eternal battle between good and evil. In folklore, the Red Sea is a permanent prison for evil

spirits worthy of anything imagined by the writers of *Ghostbusters*. Perhaps a version of these beliefs provided the motivation for those who used ritual marks to neutralise whatever evil lurked beneath Creswell Crags.

NOTES

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3 BBC4 *Digging for Britain*, series 8 (2020), interview with Creswell Crags guide John Charlesworth.

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6 CJ Binding and LJ Wilson, ‘Ritual Protection Marks in Wookey Hole and Long Hole, Somerset’, *Proceedings of the University of Bristol Speleological Society* 2010, 25 (1).

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PROTECTION FROM EVIL

The use of apotropaic marks – from incised symbols to ritual burn marks – to protect homes and buildings from supernatural attack is a near-universal and age-old practice



LEFT: A 'daisy wheel' at Bolsover Castle.
BELOW LEFT: Another example from a mediæval barn in the Peak District. BELOW RIGHT: Marian marks at Clandon Park.



Since the dawn of time people have used a wide range of magical rituals to neutralise a variety of supernatural powers. Anglo-Saxon charms protected against elves and demons, and following conversion to Christianity these beliefs survived in the oral tradition, under the gloss of the new religion. During the mediæval period, invocations to the Virgin, assorted saints and Christ displaced the old gods but the cloying presence of evil persisted. In the later Middle Ages, following the Reformation, the locus of evil was identified as the Devil and during the European witch-hunts, the idea of a Satanic pact with 'witches' received official recognition. During the reign of James VI of Scotland (later James I, 1603-25) fear and anxiety concerning witchcraft

grew to extraordinary levels. The King blamed the North Berwick witches for an attempt on his life in 1590 and, following the Gunpowder Plot or "Jesuit Treason" of November 1605, his government blamed the assassination attempt directly upon the "abominable practice of Rome and Satan".

In *Hidden Charms* James Wright links this fearful period with a desire to protect high-status buildings with a range of ritual marks. Protecting a home from evil is a very ancient practice and evidence for rituals, whether via a spell, hex or some other magical offering have been identified in buildings across the world (see, for example, FT332:11, 339:28-35). Liminal zones were seen as vulnerable to attack by evil spirits and

therefore hearths, windows and doors required special treatment. Chimneys and fireplaces were also focal points for clusters of protective marks as they were entry points for witches and, in later folklore, Santa Claus. A passage in the book *Demonologie* written by King James VI may refer to these ideas, noting that evil spirits "will come and pearce through whatsoever house or Church, though all ordinarie passages be closed, by whatsoever open, the aire may enter in at".

A recent survey of the Queen's House at the Tower of London by Wright identified 74 ritual protection marks in 31 locations.¹ The mediæval building acquired a fearsome reputation as the place where a number of high-profile political prisoners such as Sir Thomas More and Guy Fawkes were held or interrogated before their executions. Another survey of the King's Tower at Knole in Kent also revealed a large group of ritual protection marks in the first and second floor chambers of the stone building, which dates from the mid-15th century. Its owner, the Lord Treasurer and Earl of Dorset, Thomas Sackville, enjoyed the patronage of James I and remodelled the building in 1606 anticipating a royal visit. One of the wooden beams in the second-floor chamber is decorated with 11 protective marks including mesh patterns, 'Marian' marks and ritual burns. This beam has been dated by dendrochronology to the spring or summer of 1606, the height of the witchcraft mania. Even more intriguing, the protective marks on the beam were made with a carpenter's knife during the construction process, as they are horizontal to the timber, "indicating that the beam was standing upright in the framing yard" when they were added.

Ritual protective marks have only recently received the attention they deserve. One of the first papers on the subject appeared in 1999 when Tim Easton published his notes on marks identified inside East Anglian timber buildings dating from the period 1550-1750. In 2004, Linda Wilson and Chris Binding's discovery of marks in the Mendip caves helped to settle the debate

DAVID CLARKE

LEFT: DAVID CLARKE. RIGHT: BEN THOMAS

over their function. Before this evidence came to light some had suggested they had a purely practical function as carpenter's or mason's marks used to guide the placing of timbers in buildings. But the discoveries in Derbyshire and Somerset occur in clear ritual contexts that cannot possibly be linked with any construction function.

In 2016 Historic England asked the public to help them record new examples of protective markings across the UK. This appeal produced 600 responses, 100 of which came from parts of Scotland and Wales. The result demonstrates how widespread these marks actually are. The highest number (150) were reported from the Eastern Counties, where an earlier survey of 64,000 inscriptions in 800 parish churches had revealed that some 20 per cent have a ritual protection function. The survey results may be the tip of an iceberg or simply reflect the activities of fieldworkers like Brian Hoggard who runs *www.apotropaios.com*, but the secretive nature of counter-witchcraft helps to explain why they have been overlooked by generations of architectural historians and archaeologists.

Hoggard and other researchers have identified four main categories of ritual protection marks:

'DAISY WHEELS', HEXAFOILS OR TRISKELES

The wheel is an ancient Solar symbol that has been identified from Egyptian tombs and prehistoric ritual sites in Europe. These geometric symbols were cut with a pair of compasses and sometimes contain three petals indicating the Trinity. Others have six or 12 petals but all are thought to be protective, acting as 'demon traps' to capture, confuse or deflect evil spirits. Examples have been found on the roof timbers of barns and walls of churches dating from the medieval period until as recently as the 19th century. Some appear to have been cut in fresh wood before it was incorporated into buildings while others were made once the timber had dried out. Examples include those at Shakespeare's birthplace, where they are carved near the door to a cellar once used to store beer. Striking examples can be found on the walls of the tithe barn at Bradford-upon-Avon and in the 17th century Star Chamber at Bolsover Castle in Derbyshire.

PENTAGRAMS

Five-pointed stars are known in ancient Greece and are mentioned in both Jewish texts and the Babylonian Talmud. The 'Star of David' or the 'Seal of Solomon', formed by two triangles, occurs throughout the early modern period in Europe as a potent symbol to deflect demons. In the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the hero has a pentagram painted



on his shield to protect him against evil during his quest. In more recent years the pentagram has become associated with black magic, paganism and witchcraft, but its original function was protective, as can be seen from numerous examples in religious and secular buildings such as Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire.

MARIAN MARKS

The double VV symbol, sometimes intertwined in the middle to form an inverted M or upright W, is ubiquitous in buildings dating from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Since 2004 many examples have been identified in the caves of the Mendips and, more recently, at Creswell Crags. A popular Marian prayer, attributed to Father Claude Bernard (1588-1641) includes the line "I fly to thee, Mary, Virgin of virgins, mother of Jesus Christ" and the use of this Christian protective symbol survived religious changes during the Reformation. It continued in use as late as the 19th century, when it appears to have become a generic good luck symbol. Other variants include the letters AM and PM for *Pace Maria* and IH – the first two letters of the Greek form of Jesus. These can be found in large numbers scratched upon wooden beams in barns or etched into the plasterwork of mediæval churches and houses.

ABOVE: Protective daisy wheels in Shakespeare's birthplace. **LEFT:** Ritual 'burn marks' in the Tudor kitchens at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire.

'MESH MARKS'

These are patterns that functioned as 'demon traps', with an endless line that was intended to ensnare evil spirits like a spider catching a fly. Once inside the mesh, the malevolent forces would be pinned against the wall and unable to escape the endless line inside the maze.

BURN MARKS

These were made by a candle or taper held against timber for lengthy periods of time to create a tear-shaped mark. This was a form of magic whereby exposing timber to a deliberate flame could prevent a more disastrous blaze of the type that regularly destroyed mediæval buildings. Experimental archaeology has confirmed these markings could not have been created accidentally. Burn or scorch marks were evil-averting and large numbers have been found in the kitchens of Haddon Hall in Derbyshire and the King's Tower at Knole in Kent, both dating from the 17th century.

The scorch marks on the door of Blythburgh church in Suffolk are said, in folklore, to be the finger-marks of the Devil, who appeared in the form of a huge black dog during a service on Sunday morning in August 1577 (see **FT 66:53; 195:30-35; 340:18-19**). Ironically, they may have been placed there to protect the church against evil. As is often the case in folklore, a story emerged to explain their presence long after their original purpose had been forgotten.

NOTES

- 1 Brian Hoggard, *Magical House Protection: the Archaeology of Counter-witchcraft*, 2019.
- 2 James Wright, 'Cultural anxieties and ritual protection in high-status early modern houses', *Hidden Charms* conference proceedings 2016.

WITCH MARKS IN NATIONAL TRUST PLACES

As you might expect from an organisation that looks after so many old buildings, the National Trust has a fine collection of witch marks, and many of them are on public view



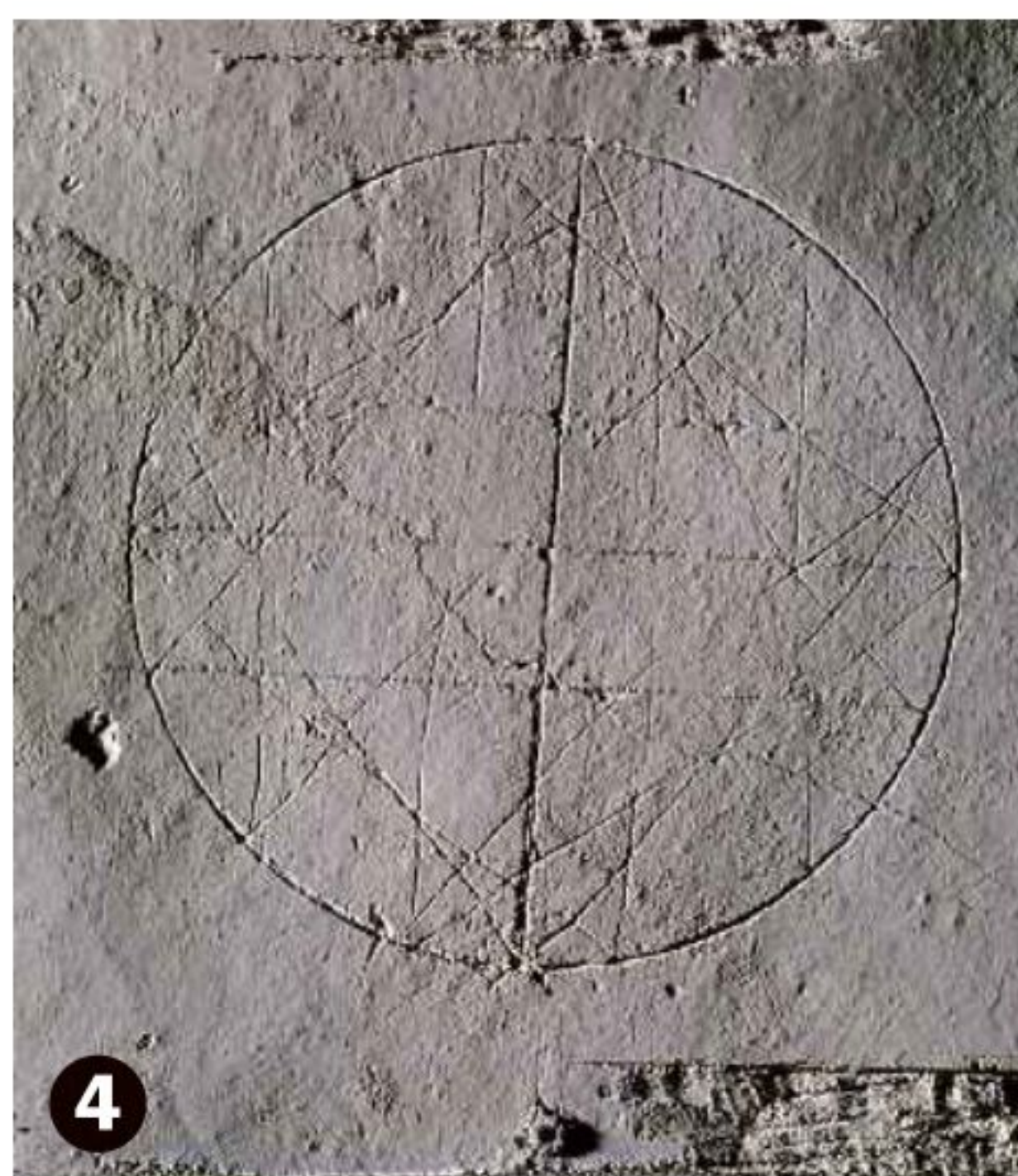
NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JAMES DOBSON



MATTHEW CHAMPION



LEFT: RACHEL HALL. CENTRE: NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JOHN HAMMOND



1 The timber-framed Tudor-period Little Moreton Hall in Cheshire has more than 250 apotropaic symbols including burn-marks, circles and criss-crossed lines, but you might need a guide with a torch to point them out to you. One of the most elaborate is a 12-petal daisy wheel high up on a ceiling beam in the Great Parlour. Lavenham Guildhall in Suffolk is of a similar age and also has a daisy-wheel, plus a mummified cat found in the walls.

2 Stone-built Bodiam Castle in Kent has protective symbols around many of the doors and windows. These were probably added when the castle was constructed. They can be difficult to spot because the exterior markings are now quite weathered and to the untrained eye they're easily confused with the mason's marks.

3 A rare type of witch-mark can easily be seen on the outer wall of the stable block at Belton

House in Lincolnshire. The star-shaped ausklis cross is more common in Eastern Europe where it's regarded as a holy sign for driving away evil spirits. No one is quite certain how these ended up on a late 17th century building near Grantham. Stables obviously needed protection as well as houses because there's a daisy wheel near a west-facing window on the stable block – now gift shop – at Canons Ashby in Northamptonshire.

4 The witch marks at Woolsthorpe Manor are intriguing because it's just possible they were made by mathematician and alchemist Sir Isaac Newton. Newton was known for scribbling on the walls of his rooms, and the graffiti at Woolsthorpe – including a rough sketch of a post-mill – is frequently attributed to him.

5 At Thorington Hall in Essex you can sleep safely in a



building protected by witch marks on the newel post of the main stairs. The building is rented out as a holiday cottage – though it's usually open for general viewing on Heritage Open Days. It is reputedly haunted by the spirit of a little girl in brown, so either the witch marks aren't working or the spirit is a friendly one.

6 In 2015, archaeologists surveying Knole in Kent uncovered criss-crossed lines beneath the floor of a room built to accommodate King James I – a well-known opponent of witchcraft. Unfortunately, the effort was wasted as King James never actually visited Knole.

7 At Clondon Park in Surrey, witch marks in the form of crossed lines, V and M symbols, and a five-pointed star scratched into beams and plaster and hidden behind panelling, were only discovered after the building was gutted by fire in 2015. The

building dates from the 1730s so it's interesting that these protective symbols were still in use well into the Enlightenment.

8 A very rare set of witch marks can be seen on the hearth stones of the Fleece Inn in Worcestershire. These wide circles, which appear to have been worn rather than chiselled into the stone, are painted and have been maintained by a succession of landlords. The 15th century building which started out as a farmhouse was owned by one family until it was given to the National Trust by the last of the line, Lola Taplin, in 1977. Lola was very proud of her witch marks and was photographed rubbing them with an abrasive chalky “donkey stone”. If this was the traditional way the family kept them fresh, that might account for the wear. It's interesting to note that if witch marks could be chalked or painted, they may once have been even more common than they are now.

Other places to see witch marks include Tattershall castle in Lincolnshire, which has a range of mediæval graffiti, including a protective circular ‘compass mark’ near one of the windows. Perhaps it was felt that this unusual brick-built castle might need extra protection from the supernatural.

In some buildings the witch marks are in concealed spaces known only to the person who made them – and presumably to the evil spirits repelled by them. A collection of witch marks tucked away in the attics of The Vyne near Basingstoke can only be seen on rare behind-the-scenes house tours.

Details to help you plan your visit to all the properties mentioned are available from the National Trust website: www.nationaltrust.org.uk. Due to the spread of coronavirus, all National Trust houses, parks and gardens are currently closed. Check the website for details on future re-opening.

“TO A HIGH PLACE”

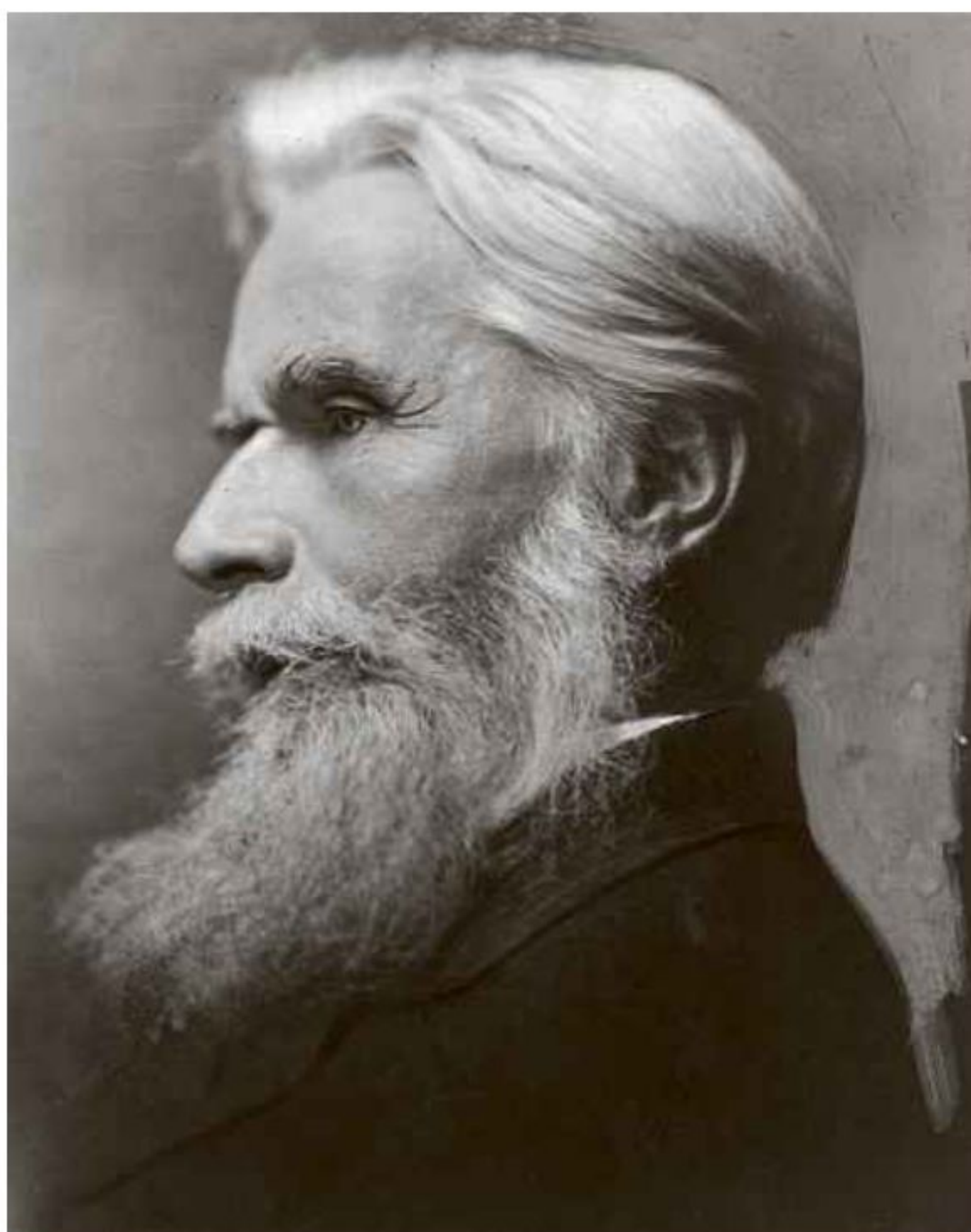
JESUS AND THE TEMPTATIONS, PART ONE

The greatest number of recorded levitators are those Christians who were inspired by Jesus's life and legend. In the first instalment in a two-part feature **BOB RICKARD** analyses the 'Temptations' – a significant moment of paranatural transportation in Jesus's life. Part two will discuss these in terms of traditions of magical battles in mid-air.

“Had there been a Lunatic Asylum in the suburbs of Jerusalem, Jesus Christ would infallibly have been shut up in it at the outset of his public career. That interview with Satan on a pinnacle of the Temple would alone have damned him, and everything that happened after could have confirmed the diagnosis. The whole religious complexion of the modern world is due to the absence from Jerusalem of a Lunatic Asylum.” – Impressions & Comments (1914)

This sarcastic quotation by the English physician and essayist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939) shows a level of cynicism that I do not share. Not only does it oversimplify a complicated scene to the verge of bigotry, it is plainly wrong in its lampooning of how 'lunatics' were treated in ancient Levant. Even a cursory survey of the literature discussing levitation – and its phenomenologically related instances of teleportation and bilocation – reveals a bewildering landscape, peopled with the supposedly 'possessed', shamans, saints, demons, magicians, mediums, demigods and even alien contactees, to name just a few of those actors or agents most often discussed. Had they an opinion, and someone to voice it, they might have challenged Ellis's mocking statement. I humbly offer this alternative.

Ellis, unreasonably, asserts that Jesus's contemporaries would have judged him by the standards of the *modern* world. However, it is evident that, like many archaic societies, the people of Jesus's day had their own ways of accommodating eccentrics. Many became prophets; most of the rest were simply judged to be heretics, possessed, or both.¹ I hope to show that the accounts of the levitation-like experiences of Jesus – as narrated in the scenes of his Temptation – seem to conform to a near-universal pattern



LEFT: Havelock Ellis, who would have had Jesus committed to a lunatic asylum.

FACING PAGE: *Jesus Carried up to a Pinnacle of the Temple* in one of the 350 watercolours from James Tissot's epic series *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*.

The levitation-like experiences of Jesus conform to a universal pattern

of impromptu 'shamanism'.² By this I mean that an encounter with a numinous entity, including levitation-like phenomena, is sometimes associated with an ecstatic experience. These are precisely the elements that marked the character of Jesus as a prophet among his contemporaries. Wishing to avoid yet another fruitless debate about the nature of miracles, this study simply focuses upon discourse about 'paranatural transportation'³ in the life of Jesus.

Stories from our past can carry at least two main opposing vectors: heroes become immortalised and gods are made mortal (euhemerism). In the case of Jesus, both processes were, and still are, active. That said, it is not unreasonable to suppose that contemporary observers of an actual event – such as the sudden elevation of a person, floating some distance through the air, or disappearing only to reappear elsewhere – would find it difficult to explain what they thought they saw *without* resorting to some sort of 'supernatural' intervention. Modern witnesses of paranatural phenomena face a similar difficulty but in the *other* direction. Even if they had recording devices, many of today's observers would find materialistic or rationalistic

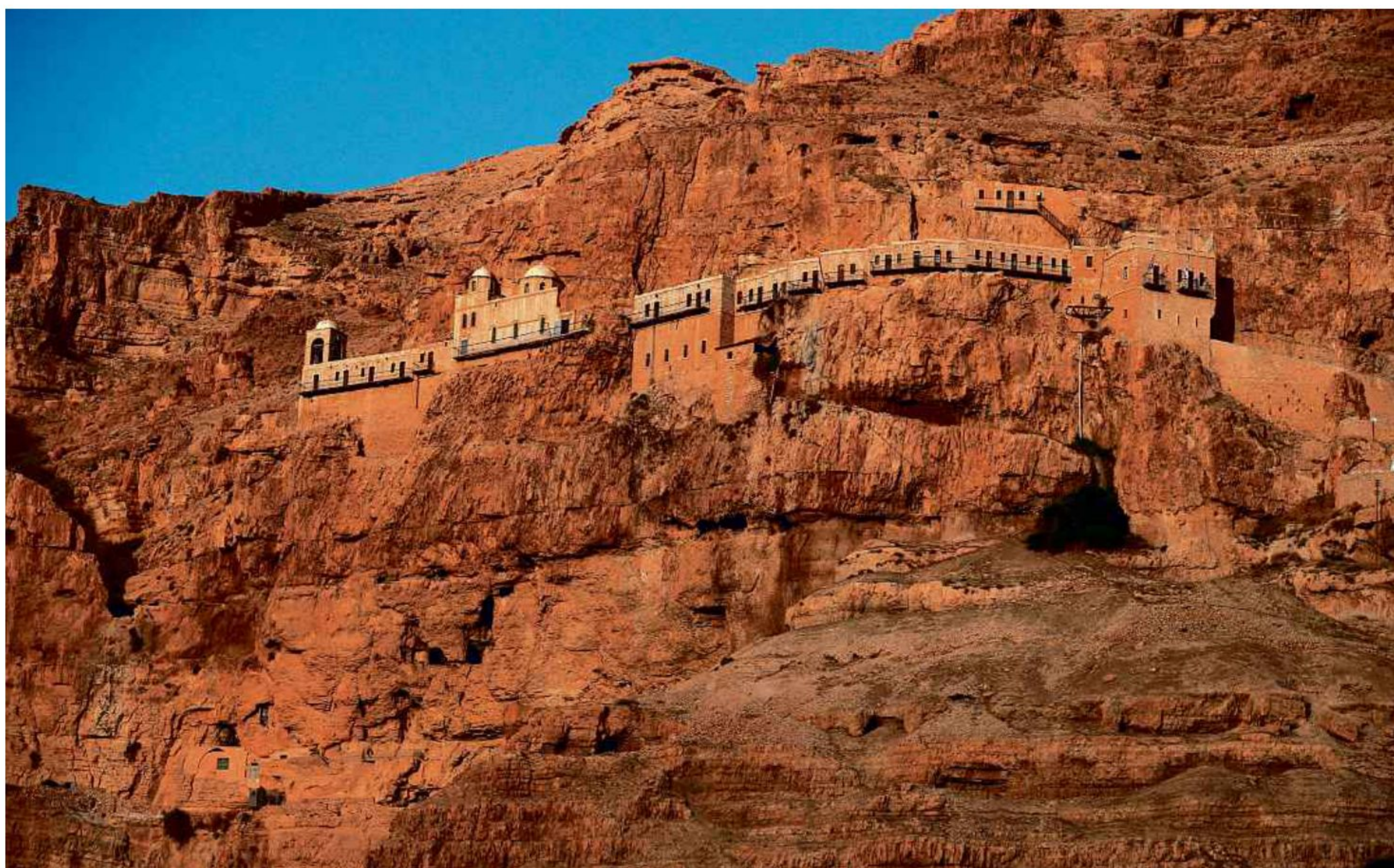
reasons for rejecting the evidence of their own eyes and ears – a reaction familiar to students of encounters with UFOs, ghosts or fairies.

What would an authentic account look like? For us today, it would make for undoubtedly strange reading, especially if we assume an honest and awed witness tried faithfully to describe what happened in the language and images available to him or her. The matter of language, as will become apparent, seems to be critically important.

JESUS AND THE TEMPTATIONS

The terrestrial ministry of Jesus begins with "that interview", as Ellis put it. The bodily 'Ascension' with which Jesus departed this world may well remain a mystery. His earthly, public mission, however, was inaugurated by three important 'set pieces', two of which feature a teleportation-like mode of transportation as an essential part.





ABOVE: The Quarantia today, with the Greek Orthodox Christian Monastery of the Temptation near Jericho. The monastery was built during the sixth century above the cave traditionally said to be the place where Jesus spent 40 days and nights fasting and meditating before the Temptations.

During his baptism by John the Baptist, the Gospel writers say, the “Holy Spirit” descended upon Jesus and he experienced direct communion with God. Almost immediately, Jesus is compelled to go into the Judæan Desert (a region north and east of Jerusalem towards the Dead Sea). The phrase used in the *Catechism* and elsewhere is significant: “At once... he is *driven* by the Spirit into the desert.”⁴

Arriving there – quite possibly still in an ecstatic trance – Jesus is described as fasting and contemplating for 40 days and nights, much as did Moses and Elijah before him. Towards the end of this period of isolation, hunger and exposure, when presumably his physiological and psychological stresses are at their greatest – that is, in a state not unlike the effect of a shamanistic rite – Jesus is confronted by an entity frequently referred to as the ‘Tempter’.

The Tempter challenges Jesus three times, each time clearly acknowledging Jesus’s innate magical ability.⁵ In the first instance, the exhausted Jesus is invited to relieve his hunger by turning stones into bread. As this has no immediate bearing upon our subject, I leave it there.

Next, this entity – apparently with great mystical or magical power *at his own disposal* – transports Jesus upwards, to one of the great peaks in the region. The impression of these movements given by the texts is one of teleportation: *instantaneous transportation to*

A ridge of barren rocks where “the owls dwell and the satyrs dance”

a distant location.

While the exact location is unknown, Jabal al-Qarantal (as it is called in Arabic), located just northwest of Jericho, has historically been regarded as the mountain where Jesus was shown “all the kingdoms of the world”. Often referred to as Quarantania, it is a desolate ridge of mostly barren rocks overlooking “the sluggish, bituminous waters of the Sodomitic Sea”, where, as theologian and philologist Frederick Farrar (1831-1903) puts it, “in the language of the prophets, ‘the owls dwell and the satyrs dance’”.

From there, Jesus is again transported, this time to “the highest pinnacle of the Temple”,⁶ an estimated distance of 20km (12 miles) directly southwest from Quarantania to Jerusalem. At this remove, the identity of this ‘pinnacle’ can only be conjectured. Modern understanding of the word tends to be influenced by the familiar depictions in high art of Jesus and the Adversary standing

on the very highest tower or peak. Derived from the Latin for the tip of a wing, the word could equally apply to the extremity of any building.

Over time, the top of the walls of the Temple Mount have been destroyed and rebuilt. Farrar describes the locale thus: “Some well-known pinnacle of that well-known mass must be intended; perhaps the roof of the *Stoa Basilike*, or the Royal Porch on the southern side of the Temple which looked down sheer into the valley of the Kidron below it, from a height so dizzy that, according to the description of Josephus, if any one ventured to look down, his head would swim at the immeasurable depth.” If the south-eastern corner is meant (see the Temple panel), the drop into the Kidron Valley (which runs below the Temple’s eastern wall, dividing Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives) has been estimated at around 450ft (137m).⁷

While the scriptural versions of Matthew 4:5 are largely in agreement that it was “a devil” who transported Jesus, this devil’s identity is never fully clarified. For example, the *King James Bible* has: “Then the devil *taketh* him up into the holy city, and *setteth* him on a pinnacle of the temple”, where the more modern *World English Bible* has: “Then the devil *took* him into the holy city. He *set* him on the pinnacle of the temple”.

At this elevated, man-made, location, the Tempter challenges Jesus to have God make

THE SECOND TEMPLE AND ITS 'PINNACLE'

The Hebrew Bible identifies Mount Moriah – on the eastern side of Jerusalem and above the Gihon spring and the Kidron ravine – as the location of the Temple Mount. Originally, there was a 'threshing floor' on the heights of Moriah, and it was there that Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac as commanded by 'the Voice of God'. He built there a rough altar but the sacrifice was halted by 'the Voice' at its critical moment when, providentially, a ram was noticed trapped in a nearby bush and substituted for Isaac (Genesis 22:2, 14). But this is just one of a number of momentous 'rites' enacted on this 'high place'.

There can be few locations on this Earth with such strong numinous and geomantic associations as Moriah. Some have argued that this poignant scene of Abraham's testing – memorialised by Jews as the *Akedah* (the 'Binding of Isaac') – was a coded revelation of the site of the future Temple and its Holy adytum. This likely influenced King David, who later bought the 'threshing floor' for the site of the future temple.

The foundations of the First Temple are credited to David, but the construction was completed by his son Solomon. Very little is known about David as a historical figure, except that he flourished around 1,000 BC and that he had the Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem. This is believed to have been the same Ark that the Israelites brought out of Egypt. The Ark had 'rested' at the "threshing floor of Kidron" on Mount Moriah before it was lodged in a tent outside a city gate, awaiting the completion of the First Temple,

Similarly, precise dating of the construction of the various Temples is



ABOVE: View of the southeast corner of the Temple Mount platform, perhaps the most likely spot for Jesus being tempted "on the pinnacle of the temple". **LEFT:** Abraham prepares to sacrifice Isaac.



problematical. Rabbinical sources suggest that work on the First Temple could have begun as late as 832 BC. This edifice was sacked by Nebuchadnezzar II in around 587 BC. Construction of the Second Temple began in the 6th century BC and was completed between 516 BC and 350 BC; it was partially reconstructed by Herod in 20-18 BC.

After the Jewish revolt in AD 66, the Romans claimed the city in AD 70 and destroyed most of the Second Temple. The 'pinnacle' that features in Jesus's Temptation may not have been a pinnacle as we know it, resulting in arguments about the actual 'highest point' of the Second Temple. The Holy of Holies was located more towards the

central or northern end of this complex, where a drop from its roof into the street below was not the 'greatest drop'. Instead, the main consensus favours the southern wall – the location of the Royal Porch – where the height of the south-eastern corner of the wall, above the Kidron valley, impressed Josephus as having the greatest drop.

The 'Royal Porch', on the southern side of the Temple, was suggested by Frederick Farrar as the location of Jesus's Temptation because it had a sheer drop of 450ft (137m) to the Kidron stream below it.¹ It may be significant that this was where *another* Christian elder faced a life-and-death trial – the martyrdom of St James the Just. The first century Romano-Jewish historian Josephus famously referred to "a tradition" that St James – who may have been Jesus's brother or cousin – was thrown down from this very location.

This James was a leader of the early Church in Jerusalem and, after Peter left, presided over the Council of Jerusalem,

trying to reconcile Jesus's teachings with the Torah and bring peace between the new Christians and the Jews. Josephus wrote that, in those days, James's actions antagonised the orthodox Jews, who petitioned the Sadducee leader to condemn and stone him. James was tricked into addressing a crowd from the top of the Temple stairs, seized and flung over the parapet, falling hundreds of feet to the court below.²

A passage quoted by Eusebius (in his *Church History*) from Hegesippus, has more detail: they "placed James upon the *pinnacle of the temple*, and threw down the just man, and they began to stone him, for he was not killed by the fall. And one of them, who was a fuller, took the club with which he beat out clothes and struck the just man on the head". James is believed to have been martyred in "62 or 69 AD".

NOTES

¹ Frederick Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, 1874, pp121-139.

² Josephus, 1890, pp475-476.



ABOVE: *The Temptation of Christ by the Devil* (12th century). At the left, the Devil dares Christ to turn stones into bread. In the middle, Satan challenges Christ, standing on the pinnacle of the Temple, to throw himself down. The angel talking to a demon at the right refers to the last Temptation of Christ, who, after refusing to worship the Devil in the “high mountain”, is ministered by angels.

good on his promise of divine assistance in moments of peril; that should he fall from a high place, the angels would intervene and save him from being dashed on the ground. The narratives of both Luke (4:10-11) and Matthew (4:6) have the devil quoting *Psalm* 91:11-12: “For he shall give his angels charge over thee... *They shall bear thee up in their hands*, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.” (My emphasis.) The devil implies that Jesus could, if he wished, use the passage to justify presumptuous acts. Jesus, as we know, retaliates, citing the Rabbinic injunction against bargaining with God.

Various schools of theologians have debated the nature of these incidents over centuries, including the order in which these Temptations occurred. The events themselves have been explained away or underplayed as visionary, symbolic, mythical, or a compound of those. But, as Farrar notes, “very few writers in the present day will regard the story of the temptation as a narrative of objective facts.” The main orthodox opinion on offer today is that these descriptions of mystical transportation are *poetic excesses* or possibly subjective expressions of his extreme fast in the wilderness. Generally, then, the scholastic consensus favours the view that the story of the ‘Temptations’ is simply a parable – albeit a significant one – in which Jesus was being tested in his understanding of his superhuman powers and the various ‘career’ paths that each would open up.

A small number of radical theorists have a different view. They point out that those same orthodox scholars have rushed

We learn of the sudden transport of Philip from Gaza to Azotus

past the very words which imply that the events *might* have occurred in the real world... words which, to a materialist and sceptical mind, must seem like embarrassing curiosities of archaic credulity. Any suggestion of levitation or teleportation, real or imagined, is ignored *a priori*. The pivotal mystery of the way in which Jesus is said to have arrived at, or was brought to, the top of a mountain and then transferred to the high pinnacle of the Temple (or vice versa) is thus glossed over and ignored.

Of the translocation of Jesus to ‘the pinnacle’, John Robertson (1856-1933) – an English parliamentarian, rationalist and advocate of the ‘Christ myth theory’ – thought that, for a mythologist, this detail easily falls into line as a variant of a *divine contest*: he compares it to “Pan and the young Zeus at the altar on the mountaintop; Pan and Apollo competing on the top of Mount Tmolus; Apollo and Marsyas; all deriving from the Babylonian figures of the Goat-God (Capricorn) and the Sun-God on the Mountain of the World, representing the starting of the Sun on his yearly course.”⁸

For Robertson, this motif – so appropriate to Jesus at the beginning of his earthly ministry – “explains at once” both the Pagan and the Christian elements, showing how the latter *can* derive from “the myth-material of the Greco-Oriental World”. Robertson therefore identifies the image of a goat-footed Satan as a variant of the Goat-God Azazel: a name which “unlike other Hebrew proper names”, says the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906), “is obscure”. Goat-footed Pan was not *merely* a satyr, says Robertson; for the Greeks, he was the actual ‘God of this world’... just as the Adversary is described in the Gospels.

Additionally, Farrar clearly considered that: “Those journeys through the air (though the sacred narrative says nothing of them)... were thoroughly in accordance with ordinary Jewish beliefs.” What could he mean by this? To begin with, the Old Testament has a number of prominent and significant references to mysterious levitation-like and teleportation-like incidents, for example those relating to Habbakuk, Elijah and Ezekiel. As these cases stray away from our discussion of Jesus, I will deal with them on another occasion. However, one tale in particular relates to our discussion of Jesus’s transportations.

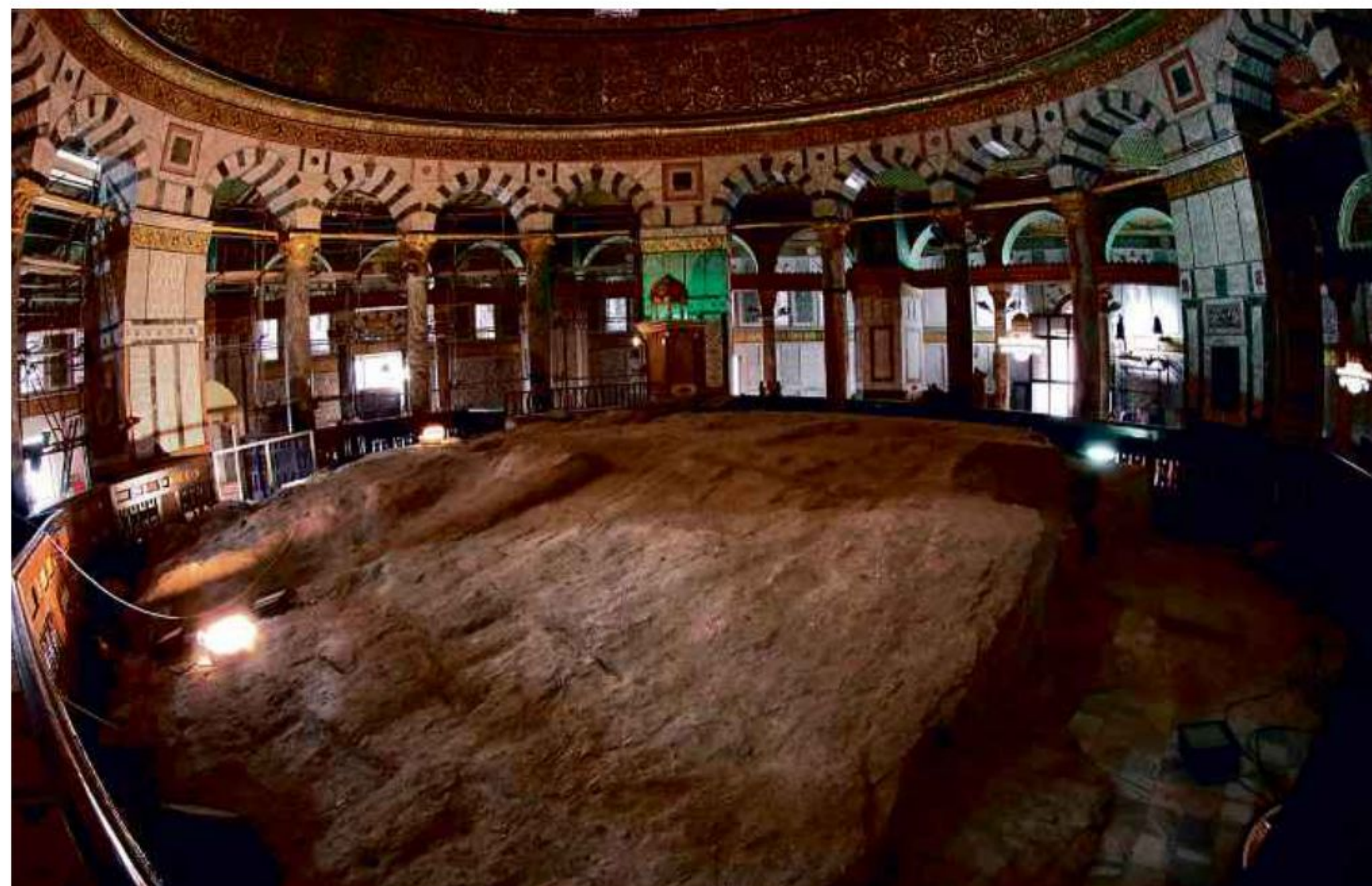
In the New Testament we learn of the sudden transport of the Apostle Philip from Gaza to Azotus. Rabbinical lore, too, includes many stories of teleporting Rabbis who “shortened the way”. And the Theosophist George Mead – in his attempt to unravel what he called “this chaos of legendary

DAVID'S FOUNDATION STONE AND OTHER BÆTYLS

There is a Jewish tradition that during work on the foundations of the First Temple, King David discovered a special stone, on which was found a simulacrum of the four Hebrew consonants forming the Tetragrammaton, the written form of 'God's Ineffable Name'. This *acheropita* (Greek: "made without human hand") became known as the 'Foundation Stone' of the new Temple, although it was never used as part of the building itself.

Mysterious stones – many of meteoric origin (brought "by angels"?) and often called *bætyl* stones – were worshipped throughout the ancient Middle East and dedicated to various gods (see David Hambling, "Bætylmania", **FT292:46-50**). Some, like the Temple Foundation Stone, bore 'holy simulacra'; others, like the Omphalos at Delphi, were believed to be animated, delivering prophecies. George Moore distinguishes true *bætyl* stones from more common 'holy' stones by their *triangular* appearance, and that they were widely believed to be "inhabited by a numen... and endowed with the power of self-motion". Using such a stone as a pillow caused Jacob to dream of the 'ladder to Heaven', which Moore argues was in itself a visionary visit to "the abode of divine beings".¹

Given the sacred nature of the Foundation Stone and the supernatural power of the Tetragrammaton, it was physically concealed and magically protected. Should its secret be stolen or defiled "there was danger of the whole nation, or even world, being perverted".² The stone was kept in the *adytum* (Latin, from Greek *adytos*, 'not to be entered'), the innermost shrine of a temple, also called the 'Holy of Holies' or *sanctum*



ABOVE: The Foundation Stone inside the Dome of the Rock mosque at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Jerusalem. It is believed by some to be the 'Foundation Stone' discovered by King David. **BELOW:** A Roman coin showing the temple at Emesa (present day Homs) housing a black conical meteorite or *bætyl*.

sanctorum.

A feature of many temples of ancient nations, an *adytum* usually contained a sarcophagus and an image of the god to whom the temple was dedicated. Crookes referred to *adyta* as "symbolic wombs". As sacred architecture they represented, in national worship, resurrection and initiation. "The Jews, when they became exclusive and wholly exoteric in their religious beliefs and practices, made the *adytum* the symbol of their national monotheism, exoterically; and esoterically a symbol of generation rather than regeneration."³

This inference, argued Edward Rice, can be read in the story of David dancing before the Ark as it was brought down from Mount Moriah (2 Samuel 6:14). He wrote that "the dance was essentially a Bacchic rite, whose meaning was unfolded

only in the Mysteries: the ark being the symbolic vehicle in which are preserved the germs of all living things destined to re-people the earth in a new cycle."⁴

The pre-Islamic version of the Kaaba in Mecca – with its famous meteoric Black Stone embedded in its eastern corner – qualified as an *adytum* (see Richard Stanley, "The Mythos Meme, **FT390:28-35**). According to

Karen Armstrong's *Islam: A Short History*, it may have once contained as many as 360 idols, and was circumambulated once a year by tribes of different religions.⁵ This form of veneration – which at one time could have been undertaken in near nakedness – was an ancient fertility rite, argues Edward Rice, of which David's dance may be a relic.⁶

Details of David's Foundation Stone are scarce, but there is a Mishna passage

which refers to the stone as "the centre of the world" – an *omphalos*. Not only does it say that the stone was there "from the days of the earlier prophets" but that it levitated "three fingers above the ground". The Talmud scholar Paul Isaac Hershon interprets this to mean that the stone was floating, quite literally "not touching the ground".⁷ This magical floating stone gains additional significance from its proximity to the location of Jesus's own paranatural transportation.

NOTES

¹ George Moore, 'Baetylia', in *American Journal of Archaeology*, 1908.

² Sir William Crookes, "Human Levitation, Illustrating Certain Historical Miracles" in *Quarterly Journal of Science* (Jan 1875).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rice, *Eastern Definitions*, 1978, p433.

⁵ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, 2002, p11.

⁶ Rice, 1978, p433.

⁷ Hershon, *Treasures of the Talmud*, 1882, p34-35.





ABOVE: Jesus and the Adversary on the pinnacle of the Temple in Botticelli's *The Temptation of Christ* (1481-1482). BELOW: Sir William Crookes became fascinated by the similarities between modern and biblical cases of levitation. FACING PAGE: A page from the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas*, c. AD 280.

fantasy” – reminds us that there were other parallels to the mid-air contest between ‘Yeshu’ and ‘Judas’, and between Simon Peter and Simon Magus. These, I will address in part two.⁹

CROOKES TAKETH ON THE ADVERSARY.

It was this lack of serious consideration of the strange ‘transportations’ during the Temptations that caught the interest of the celebrated Victorian physicist Sir William Crookes (1832–1919). He was already investigating the levitation phenomena of Spiritualistic mediums, and became intrigued by the mysterious nature of the ‘Adversary’ (as he preferred to call this Tempter), because it was this entity – the accounts agree – who had, by some power, transported Jesus to and between the high places.

In 1913, Crookes – a pioneering inventor, discoverer of elements and a former President of the Royal Society – was struck by similarities between the physical phenomena manifested by some of the Spiritualist mediums of his day and those reported of Jesus and other Biblical figures. Such a correspondence between the two groups, he thought, might imply that both involved *authentic* phenomena. Furthermore, writing around half a century before Olivier Leroy’s great analysis of 200+ cases of levitation,¹⁰ Crookes was able to show that a comparison of (seemingly) like-for-like phenomena clearly shows that the levitational phenomena of antiquity, as described, while similar, appeared to be significantly greater in power, intensity and duration than mediumistic phenomena.

Today, there is a regrettable fashion to depict Crookes as a befuddled wishful-thinking eccentric who strayed too far outside his specialisation. Certainly, the grainy black-and-white séance-room photos of him enjoying the company of the radiant

‘phantasm’ of the buxom Katie King did him no favours (see FT179:30-37). However, I suggest that anyone who makes the effort to read his meticulous accounts of his psychical investigations – both in the séance room and extensively in the literature of psychical research – as well as his reasoned rebuttals to his largely narrow-minded critics, can only conclude that Crookes was, on the whole, a careful and honest investigator. He clearly applied the caution, reasoning and erudition that he expected of scientists generally (including himself) to *all* of his work, scientific or otherwise. Regarding our topic, he devoted at least a third of his rare paper on ‘human levitation’ to the phenomena of Jesus,¹¹ with an attention to detail that matches the scholarship of the most learned of biblical commentators.

Where other descriptions of the Temptations say the trials were “provoked by” the Adversary, Crookes substituted the less aggressive “wrought by”. He considered the identity of this ‘Adversary’, present at this crucial moment in Jesus’s mission, as playing a vital part in a divine plan. This drama was a magical battle in all but name.

Jesus had just been publicly baptised as the Son of God and so, theologically speaking, he could have attained for himself any of these rewards *without* the aid of this *provocateur*. There is no clear suggestion in any account that Jesus made the physical journey on his own, or that he climbed the mountains in a normal way. By whatever manner Jesus reached the heights, the danger of falling to his death was very real. What struck Crookes was the insistence by the Gospels that it was the Adversary who had transported Jesus in these instances.

Most readers will remember that the *New Testament* includes many references to people

and animals possessed by spirits, which Jesus and his followers are tasked with exorcising. Possession by ‘spirits’ or *djinn* – especially those later translated as devils and demons – could, in those days, account for many of the inequalities, injustices, illnesses and sheer bad luck that we all encounter now and then. Anyone who excelled – thereby earning the envy of others – was open to the charge of being possessed or of using magic to personal advantage. Indeed, many prophets and wonderworkers throughout history, worldwide, have been accused of exactly this.

The fact that Jesus’s deeds, sermons and miracles were so prominent would inevitably raise a suspicion that he was possessed, if not a magician. After all, Crookes observed: “As in English and American witch trials... levitation is a classic sign of possession.”¹² This is true within other cultures, especially those with shamanic traditions.¹³

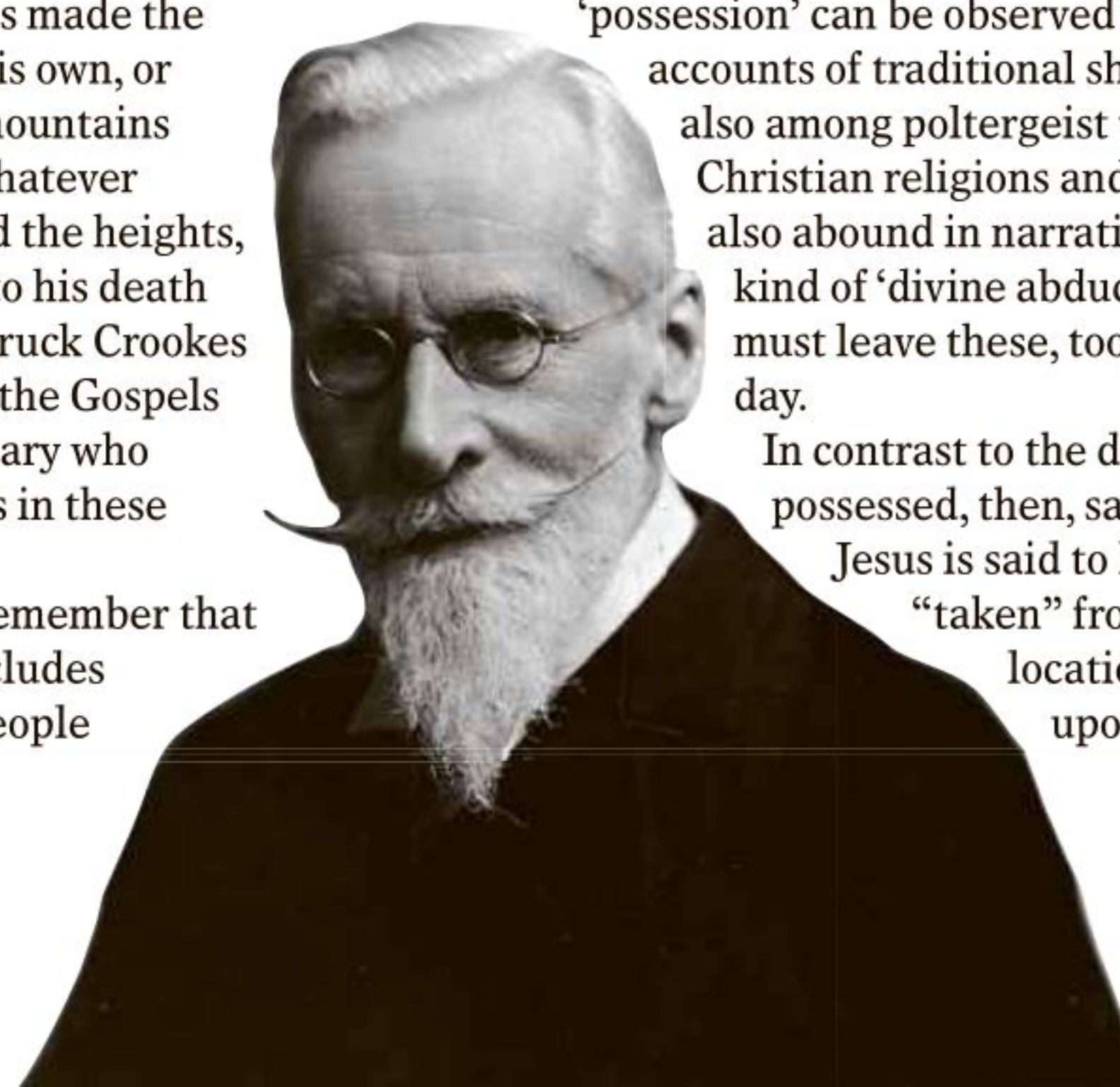
Still, it is not a simple matter to describe Jesus as possessed in any ‘ordinary’ sense. Crookes was well aware of the theological pitfalls of that path. Cures of possession, or any possession-related illness, especially in Christian cultures, were always carefully credited to God, who worked *through* the exorcist. To the public, the characteristic of possession most visible was always a disturbingly violent, dehumanising and often blasphemous spectacle – quite the opposite of the serenity and authority of the divinely inspired exorcist.

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

Crookes next drew attention to the words describing *how* Jesus was transported, arguing that they were significantly different from the comparable words describing the movements of the demonically possessed. In ‘ordinary possession’ (if I may be allowed such a term) the possessed is a victim. In the biblical text he is said to be “torn and rent”, or “seized” (Luke 9:39), or as “*thrown down in convulsions*” (Mark 5: 5).

Crookes argued that if the paranatural transportations of Jesus are to be attributed to some form of possession, they must involve a wholly different class of ‘possession’. Accounts of ‘divine’ possession are known in the annals of Christian hagiography and, generally, they do not follow the mediumistic model. Let us also acknowledge that other variations of ‘possession’ can be observed in both the accounts of traditional shamans and also among poltergeist victims. Non-Christian religions and mythologies also abound in narratives of this kind of ‘divine abduction’; but we must leave these, too, for another day.

In contrast to the demonically possessed, then, says Crookes, Jesus is said to have been “taken” from one location and “set” upon another.



The relocation is effected not by Jesus teleporting or levitating himself, or by leading or keeping up with his unlikely companion, but by *allowing* his Adversary purposefully to “taketh” and “setteth” him in these separate locations.¹⁴

Just who was this Adversary? Philologically, the Greek texts described him as Διάβολος (*diavolos*), usually given as ‘backbiter’, ‘slanderer’, etc. This significant term – *diavolos* – is used in the Gospels nine times by the Apostles as an alternative term for ‘Tempter’. John, however, records that Jesus mentions ‘diavolos’ three times; on the first occasion referring to Judas with the words “Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is Διάβολος.” (*John* 6:70)¹⁵

The character of Judas has been shaped by centuries of negative Christian propaganda. Theologically, his importance to the fulfilment of ‘Jesus’s mission’ is dumbed down. The *BibleHub Concordance*, for example, identifies Judas as Satan (or possessed by Satan), adding that he is “used by God in this plan, as a predictable wind-up toy, playing out his evil nature”. To be vilified throughout Christian history for carrying out a divinely imposed task makes little sense – religiously and philosophically... and even less in the context of ‘free will’.



In contrast, the Gnostic *Gospel of Judas* – a papyrus purporting to be the last conversations between the two, dated to AD 280 – holds that Judas was Jesus’s most trusted disciple and was singled out to receive mystical knowledge.¹⁶ This accords

with the tradition that Judas was also a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.¹⁷

The alternative legends of Jesus’s life are many, and modern discoveries add more to the canon. Here, the strange scenario of the Temptations ends. “After his shamanic session in the wilderness...” wrote Morton Smith, “the devil leaves him until an opportune time” (as the *Catholic Catechism* puts it).¹⁸

It is at this point in our discussion that the nature of “that interview” changes from a fairly passive form in which Jesus is ‘led’, to the more active form of a magical contest in mid-air, which I present in part two, together with the story of the theft of God’s Holy Name.

There, we will examine documents that were considered so offensive to both Christians and Muslims in their defamation of Jesus and His Mother that few dared to reveal their knowledge of them. Nevertheless, they are records of a particular historical discourse about ‘paranatural transportation’ which illuminate the strange subject of aerial magical battles in antiquity.

❖ **BOB RICKARD** started *Fortean Times* in 1973 and was its co-editor for 30 years. He is the author of numerous books and articles on forteana and strange phenomena.

NOTES

1 Hans Dieter Betz, in *The Sermon on the Mount* (1994) observes that “from early on even Jesus of Nazareth was implicated in that he was said to be mad or a magician possessed by Satan.”

2 Shamanism proper applies to practitioners of Siberia. However, modern scholars take notice of parallels in other cultures, occurring in ritualised contexts as well as spontaneous events. I therefore use the term to mean ritualistic behaviour that usually leads to an ecstatic state involving subjective interaction with a numinous world of supernatural entities.

3 As the more common term ‘supernatural’ is too tainted in its modern usage, I use ‘paranatural’ to mean the status of an anomalous phenomenon in its initial presentation (i.e. *before* argument about its precise nature and authenticity). It is a more modern form of the old fashioned ‘preternatural’.

4 I wish to focus upon the question of why, moments after being anointed as the ‘son of God’, Mark says the Spirit *drives* Jesus into the wilderness, but Matthew

and Luke say the divine Jesus is *led* by the Spirit, not driven.

5 I have found the detailed analysis of the Temptations by Anglican author Frederick Farrar very helpful in making sense of the Gospel accounts. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (1874).

6 My geographical reference was www.bibleatlas.org. The appearance of the Jewish Messiah at this location was predicted in the *Peshiqta Rabbati*, a collection of Jewish homilies dating from around AD 845: “Our Rabbis related that in the hour when the Messiah shall be revealed, he shall come and stand on the roof of the temple.” Rivka Ulmer, “A Synoptic Edition of Pesiqta Rabbati Based upon All Extant Manuscripts and the Editio Princeps”, in *South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism* 155, (1995).

7 Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*. The Wiki page for Matthew 4:5 usefully notes that the Greek original of ‘pinnacle’ might have been better translated as ‘tower’ or ‘parapet’, which accords with the architectural reconstruction proposed in online articles by Damien F Mackey. Mackey argues

that the original Temple was not at the present site (by the Dome of the Rock), but to the south, on the Ophel mound over the Gihon Spring, drawing on the theories of the revisionist historian Roger Waite (available online), and research by Dr Ernest L Martin (1931-2002) in *The Temples That Jerusalem Forgot* (1999). Martin also offers the geomantic theory that David deliberately placed the Ark directly over the Gihon Spring. These interpretations have been rejected by some orthodox archaeologists.

8 John H Robertson, *The Historical Jesus* (1916). Robertson had no love for the blind adherence of traditionally conservative theologians and clerics to their literal interpretations of the Gospels, especially when they countenanced no criticism, correction or illumination from “any external” source.

9 GRS Mead, *Did Jesus Live in 100 BC?* (1903). Online at: http://gnosis.org/library/grs-mead/jesus_live_100/index.htm. Mead (1863-1933) had, for some time, been HP Blavatsky’s private secretary, and the book was published by the Theosophical Society.

10 Olivier Leroy, *Levitation* (1928).

11 Sir William Crookes, “Human Levitation, Illustrating Certain Historical Miracles” in *Quarterly Journal of Science* (Jan 1875). This important article was used as a reference for the subject of levitation by Blavatsky, in her *Isis Unveiled* (1888) 13 years later.

12 Theologically, as well as in practice, exorcism is a characteristic form of magical conflict, and the identification of levitation as a sign of ‘spirit possession’ has been made in older commentaries, perhaps the earliest being the Neo-Platonic philosopher Iamblichus in his *De Mysteriis*, declaring that one of the signs of possession by spirits was for the body to “be borne aloft in the air.”

13 The association between levitational phenomena and poltergeists is another huge area of study. See Bob Rickard, “Raising Children: The Poltergeist Connection”, **FT379:44-52**.

14 John Nolland, in his (2005) commentary on the *Gospel of Matthew*, has argued that the word translated as ‘taketh’ in Matthew’s account “is the

same verb as was used to refer to Joseph *taking* baby Jesus to Egypt and back”, forcing a contrast between a ‘righteous’ and an ‘evil’ transportation of Jesus. ‘Taken’ is also the word used almost universally for paranatural ‘abductions’ by numinous entities of all kinds, in fairylore, ufology, witchcraft, demonology, in the sense of ‘spirited away’.

15 See www.biblehub.com/greek/1228.htm for the philology of ‘diabolos’.

16 For a summary of the evidence supporting a re-evaluation of the canonical Judas, see the Wiki page ‘Gospel of Judas’.

17 Derived from Greek for ‘council’, *Sanhedrin* refers to a judicial court of rabbis appointed in major Jewish cities. Two major parties contended for seats in the Greater Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. Pharisees held that all events were divinely ordained and believed a Messiah would bring world peace; Sadducees rejected resurrection after death. The latter name became a byword for dogmatic doubt. Hence, for example, Joseph Glanvill’s usage in the title of his *Saducismus triumphatus* (1681).

18 Moreton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (1978).

Mulch, Myth and Magic

LISA GLEDHILL digs into the world of allotment folklore, from top-secret super-spuds and lunar planting cycles to butterfly whispering and the terrifying leek-slasher...

My Grandad was a proper gardener. He didn't waste time growing things you can't eat, his greenhouse was made from old window frames nailed together, and there was no horticultural problem that couldn't be solved by the application of Jeyes Fluid or Epsom salts. His large garden was filled with terrible hazards for a small child – razor-edged tin cans on strings to scare birds, cloches made from sheets of cracked glass and God-knows-what sinister substances in unlabelled bottles. I adored it.

We lived in a northern coal town and just down the road was a sprawl of allotments where miners spent their precious above-ground hours ruminating in their pigeon crees, growing colossal leeks and avoiding their families. Grandad went there to buy seeds, swap stories and share knowledge. I never realised how much of it I'd absorbed until, 40 years later and 300 miles further south, I took on my own allotment.

My plot is on a new site where the sheds are purpose-built, not made from old doors, and growing vegetables is a choice not a survival strategy, but the culture is comfortably familiar. It seems all vegetable-growing communities share a collective unconscious of folklore, magical thinking and (sub)urban myths to sustain them in their endless wars against slugs, blight and the British weather. There are plenty of good books and websites listing the curious beliefs of farmers and gardeners in olden times, but I'm interested in the folklore of today. The little rituals that modern gardeners still cling to – and the lengths we'll go to in insisting that our personal beliefs really do have a proper, practical, scientific basis because we're no longer officially allowed to believe that evil spirits can harm our turnip crops.

THE LORE OF PLANTING

One of the most important things a vegetable grower must decide is when to start planting. One popular bit of folklore advises testing the soil temperature with your bare buttocks. If it's warm enough to sit on comfortably it's time to sow your seeds.



LEFT: Planting by the new Moon.

Potatoes are vegetables of great medical and magical potency

The trouble is, I don't know anyone who's ever done this or even claimed to know someone who's done it. Was it ever genuinely practised? I can think of easier ways to judge when it's time to sow. In my case it's generally when the weeds start threatening to take over. Personally, I wouldn't be surprised if the bare buttock test started out as a gardener's joke or possibly an apprenticeship prank to see which novice gardeners were gullible enough to try it.

Potatoes are vegetables of particularly great medical and magical potency if you believe the old herbals,¹ so it makes sense that we're often advised to plant them on sacred days. I've heard St Patrick's Day, St George's Day, Palm Sunday and Good Friday all recommended. This could be a faint relic of memory from the time when this new-fangled vegetable, a relative of deadly nightshade, was treated with great suspicion. At first, strict Protestants in England and Scotland refused to eat it on the grounds that it isn't mentioned in the

Bible. The more pragmatic Irish Catholics decided that it would probably be OK as long as you said a prayer, sprinkled your seed crop with Holy Water and stuck them in the ground on a day when God or one of his deputies is on the alert.² Modern gardeners who recommend planting your spuds on a holy day usually say it's to avoid frost, but that doesn't always work – especially in a year when Easter comes early. My favourite bit of planting advice comes from one of the blokes at the allotments near

my Grandad's old house. He says: "Don't plant your potatoes until the dandelions are in flower on the Boiler Road." It's a cast-iron guarantee, but not much use if you don't live within visiting distance of the Boiler Road. Maybe they should set up a web-cam.

Other crops have their auspicious times for planting too – broad beans on St Valentine's Day, French beans when the first cuckoo calls and onions on the shortest day, for harvesting on the longest day. Most of these tips are just handy aids to memory but the biodynamic movement believes the precise timing of planting is critical to a crop's success. The system is guided by the phases of the Moon and, broadly speaking, it recommends planting leafy crops, which grow upwards, when the Moon is waxing and root crops, which grow downwards, when the Moon is waning. Within that overarching system are many variations and refinements influenced by astrology and the farming theories of Rudolph Steiner.³ Does this count as folklore? Followers of biodynamics say the system is based on subtle but very real phenomena such as gravity, light levels and the transmission of water and nutrients through plant tissues. Others say it's just another example of the magical principle 'as above, so below' – as the Moon grows, so will your crop. I've heard people with no knowledge of Steiner say that it's best to mow your lawn when the Moon is waning so it doesn't grow back too quickly. I think that kind of acceptance without understanding counts as a folkloric belief. I've dabbled with planting in accordance with the Moon's



ABOVE: The author's allotment: vegetable growing communities share a collective unconscious of folklore, magical thinking and mythology.

cycles and I didn't notice much difference in the result, but perhaps I wasn't doing it right.

PEST WARS

Once you've got your stuff in the ground, the next challenge is keeping it going – and this is really where garden legends are made. I've never yet met a serious vegetable grower who didn't have his or her own special ways of making things grow. The trouble is, most of the buggers won't share their secrets with me! Grandad's favourite trick was covering the ground with chimney soot. Not only did this add valuable carbon and nitrogen to the soil, he said the dark colour helped the soil warm up quicker in the spring. The trouble was, he had a coal fire, so he was probably also dosing the soil with traces of uranium, lead, antimony and a range of other heavy metals. Still, it never did me any harm.

There's no end to the number of things that want to eat your plants before you do, so gardeners have devised a range of imaginative ways to kill them. My Grandad waged constant war against cabbage white butterflies, but they're fast moving critters so he'd try to charm them into staying still long enough to be killed by repeatedly chanting: "Let, let, let, my bonny pet." I'm not sure it worked, but he believed it did. Mind you, he also believed you should never step on a slug because it would turn into lots more slugs.

Copper rings or tape are often placed around plants to keep off slugs and snails because it's believed that slug-slime reacts

with the metal to create an electrical tingle that the creatures find unpleasant. I've tried this and I think I noticed a benefit, but it's hard to be certain. Recently, copper tools have become popular on the basis that they also deter slugs and kill soil-born bacteria due to a sort of homeopathic effect from leaving tiny particles of copper in the soil. I'm much more dubious about this, especially as copper tools can cost 10 times as much as their stainless-steel equivalents – but they photograph so prettily in the pages of lifestyle magazines.

Nicotine spray used to be popular for destroying bugs but is now banned; I've often met growers who believe that if you save up enough dog-ends and soak them in water you can make your own.⁴ In the carefree days of the 20th century, gardeners tackled pests and diseases with a whole arsenal of toxic substances, such as cyanide "bombs" to destroy aphids and lead-based treatments to kill cabbage root fly. These days, gardeners tend to use more benign (and legal) substances for pest control, but the way they apply them often mirrors the old techniques and sometimes feels closer to folk magic than science. Garlic candles have replaced cyanide vapour, and I've been told that burying rhubarb leaves beneath cabbage seedlings will prevent club root,⁵ but this resembles cargo-cult thinking more than evidence-based prevention. I admit I haven't run strictly controlled comparison trials, but I did once try a concentrated garlic candle to get rid of blackfly in my conservatory-porch.

I was expecting a pleasant pizzeria-kitcheny sort of smell but what I got was an eyeball-blistering thick yellow vapour, probably not much less noxious than the cyanide. I also failed to thoroughly seal all the airways between the porch and the main house. The effect on the blackfly was inconclusive but the effect on my marital harmony was for a while quite devastating.

Another more gruesome kind of magical thinking sometimes occurs when dealing with larger pests. It used to be fairly common to hang the corpses of moles from fences and this was explained to me as a way of warning other vermin to keep away from your garden. I haven't seen this myself since the 1980s, but I have heard that it still goes on. Could this work? It's just possible that the smell of rotting mole might discourage other moles. An alternative explanation for hanging vermin from fences is that it's a way for pest controllers to show the landowner that they are doing a good job – but that would only apply to farms or large gardens, not to small gardens where the owner does his own mole-killing. This is one trick I haven't tried.

TERROR IN THE LEEK TRENCHES

I am lucky enough to have grown up in the town which was for decades the home of the World Leek Championship. Every September the cream of the leek-growing community from across the globe (though mainly from the north east of England) would gather at the working men's club just a couple of minutes from my home

to compare the fruits of a year's labour. Fertiliser recipes and growing regimes were closely guarded secrets, but occasional hints would leak out. Manure, beer and seaweed are all good, but apparently a pregnant woman's urine beats all of these for making the leeks swell. Some growers believe that only flesh and blood are good enough to satisfy the leek god. Rotting fish, roadkill, dead dogs and possibly missing hitch-hikers are rumoured to have been dug into the allotments of Northumberland by those obsessed with growing the ultimate leek. At the elite level of competition, the leeks are never eaten. Instead, they're carefully replanted and allowed to produce seed for next year's crop – the allium equivalent of being put out to stud. Successful seed strains were often handed down from father to son.

Then there were the stories of the dreaded leek-slasher. Every year there were reports of potential prize-winners being knifed, dosed with weed-killer, or peppered with gun-shot. Sneakier assailants would allegedly spike the ground with excess fertiliser so the leeks would peak too soon and split before show day. From August onwards, grown men – sometimes armed – would spend all night in their leek trenches guarding their precious charges. Undoubtedly there were some genuine attacks among rival growers⁶ but as with Spring-heeled Jack and other nebulous night-time assailants, fear, paranoia (and probably sleep deprivation) turned the leek-slasher into an allotment bogeyman, a semi-mythological demon stalking the trenches of the imagination.

Leek enthusiasm was an almost exclusively male passion and I can remember the days when allotments – at least in north east England – were pretty much men-only territory. A wife might just about be allowed to water her husband's tomatoes if he was poorly but the idea of her



ABOVE: Planting rhubarb leaf beneath a cabbage seedling.

having her own plot was unthinkable. I'm pleased to say this has changed, but I still hear some odd gender-taboos about herb and vegetable growing. The most common one seems to be that rosemary will only grow in a household where the woman is the dominant partner. Visitors to my garden sometimes smirk knowingly at the huge, thriving rosemary bush; but the same bit of folk wisdom is also applied to sage, and my sage is quite small and puny. Mint and cucumbers are said only to grow in a household where the man is in charge and parsley will only grow when planted by a man⁷ – preferably a bachelor; but he must be a decent sort of chap because parsley won't grow for the wicked.⁸ All these caveats must have been invented as a jokey way to explain why parsley is notoriously slow and difficult to

germinate. Mint on the other hand will grow through concrete.

MAGICAL THINKING

What about a bit of magic? Do gardeners still believe in the healing ability of certain plants or the power of ritual to make the crops grow? Well, yes and no. Modern pagans certainly do, and plenty of them are gardeners. Herbalists also use many traditionally 'magical' plants in their work, although they usually ascribe the results to the biochemical properties of the plants rather than to supernatural powers. But what about your average vegetable grower who just wants a few beans for the Sunday dinner? They often dismiss the idea of magical plants as a lot of old nonsense, but dig a bit deeper and quite a few of them will admit to using one or two old remedies 'just for fun'. Alternatively, they'll try to give a 'scientific' explanation for why a magic idea – say the idea that garlic soaks up diseases – is really true.

The concept of sacrifice is a fundamental and universal magical principle. In agricultural societies this can involve offering the first fruits – either an entire first crop or the earliest ripening part of a crop – to the presiding deity, or to the fairies. Similarly, gardeners often leave the first crop from a new perennial plant for the birds or for the compost heap. Usually they say it's to let the plant get established, but in practical terms that's not much different from a magical offering – it's still giving up a benefit in the hope of greater benefits in future. I know of one allotment holder in Lincolnshire who cultivates a very large plot every year. He eats just a little of the produce and every autumn he digs everything else back into the soil, ready to start again next year. For him the process of gardening has moved beyond the practical to become a self-sustaining ritual.



ABOVE: Testing soil temperature – does anyone really do this? If so, please write in and tell us.



ABOVE: Stories of the dreaded leek-slasher are legion. BELOW: Potatoes have special power. This one from the author's garden even grew a crucifix.

For some reason, a lot of folk magic seems to involve potatoes, from using them to charm away warts⁹ to carrying one in your pocket as a cure for rheumatism¹⁰ to using them as a handy medium for carving poppets.¹¹ It's hard to see why such a mundane food should have so many magical associations, but perhaps there's more to the potato than meets the eye. At Sutton Bridge in Lincolnshire, The Agriculture and Horticultural Development Board's Crop Storage Research facility is at the forefront of UK potato science. Alongside their public research into crop quality and storage, they undertake "confidential contract research".¹² What kind of secretive investigations are going on in this Area 51 of the fens? Are they trying to breed some kind of super-spud and harness its mystic powers for anti-gravity engines and faster than light travel? I like to hope so.

There's one bit of garden magic that I can say, on the basis of personal experience, is 100 per cent true. Mother-stones really do exist. I've been hauling bucket-loads of rocks out of my small allotment patch for seven years now and there don't seem to be any fewer. I've used them to lay more than 30 metres of rubble path and still the little buggers keep coming. The only possible explanation is that they're breeding and if only I could find the mother-stone I could put a stop to it.

The myths we believe and the myths we



scoff at, the folklore that's so embedded we don't even notice it, the little rituals we weave into our everyday lives, are all highly subjective and personal things. This dip into the culture of gardening and growing is my personal experience, not a thorough or academic study. It's based on the things people have told me over the years and the things I've seen or done. Others will have different experiences and there's certainly more for me to discover; but that is one of the joys I've found in gardening – there's always something new to learn, and always someone ready to share their own tales.

✦ LISA GLEDHILL is a film maker and writer and amateur vegetable-grower with a long-standing interest in *fortean*a

NOTES

1 Potatoes have been said to cure bites, bruises, burns, chilblains, corns, freckles, frostbite, headaches, rashes, rheumatism, sprains, stings and swellings, warts and are also an aphrodisiac, but 16th century herbalist John Gerard warned that over-indulgence can cause leprosy.

2 *The Oxford Companion to Food*, Alan Davidson.

3 Biodynamics is a complex area and a thorough discussion is beyond the scope of this article. For more info start with www.biodynamic.org.uk

4 For lots of reasons, I don't recommend trying this.

5 See **FT380:53** for more on the supposed toxicity of rhubarb leaves.

6 For sample reports of leek-slashing, see *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 21 Aug 1993, p3; *Newcastle Journal*, 9 June 1969, p4; and indeed most north-east England newspapers in most summers between 1960 and 2000.

7 There are a surprisingly large number of folk beliefs associated with parsley, many of them connected to gender, sexuality and reproduction and many of them completely contradictory. See *Herbs and Herb Gardening* by Eleanour Sinclair Rohde and other herbals and collections of garden folklore.

8 My parsley and mint grow very nicely, thank you.

9 I've tried this one and the wart did disappear but I was using a pharmacy remedy at the same time so I don't know whether or not the potato was responsible.

10 See *A Modern Herbal* by Mrs M Grieve and references throughout *Ulysses* by James Joyce

11 <http://www.witchipedia.com/herb:potato>

12 <https://potatoes.ahdb.org.uk/storage/about-sutton-bridge-csr>

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Project Blue Book: the missing cases

Between 1952 and 1969 the US Air Force produced a study of UFOs. KEVIN RANDLE finds some gaps in the records...

As happens so often, I'm working on one project and get diverted to another. This time, I was looking through the Project Blue Book file index and noticed that many of the reports were labelled "case missing". There was a solution attached to the sightings, but, of course the index told me nothing of the case.

I made a quick count, and – given that there are a couple of pages missing in the copy of the index that I have, the notations are sometimes obscured and some of the pages barely readable – came up with over 300 "missing" cases. Most have cards in the files with a little information on them, but this seems to demonstrate that some of those working at Blue Book over the years weren't as careful as they might have been.

I know what you're thinking. Just what were these cases?

I went through a couple of the microfilms to see what the project cards had listed so that we would have an idea about them. Following is a sample of what I found.

On 26 December 1956, in DeFuniak Springs, Florida, the witnesses, civilians and military, watched a white, egg-shaped object with a red tinge around the edges. It was the size of a small grapefruit. It flashed with a very bright red light that was around a tenth of the size of the object. It was in sight for 15 to 25 minutes.

An unidentified officer noted on the project card: "Concur with the reporting officer that sighting caused by a/c. Although there was a helicopter in the area and the details of the sighting indicate that this was the cause, the helicopter landed 10 minutes

before the object disappeared. However, time in sight might have been incorrectly estimated. Therefore, prob aircraft is evaluation of this sight[ing]."

The details are somewhat sparse but the report seems to indicate that the object looked to be the size of a small grapefruit rather than actually being that small. I'm amused that the "concurring officer", whoever he might have been, tells us that the sighting was caused by an aircraft because there was a helicopter in the area, but adds that the helicopter landed before the object disappeared. Seems to be a bit contradictory to me.

However, without knowing more about this case, and basing it only on the few lines on the project card, it is difficult to argue with the conclusion. But then it is difficult to believe that one or more of these witnesses (I deduce there was more than one based on the "source," which was "civilian and military") wouldn't have been able to identify the object had it been a helicopter.

In another missing case, we learn that on 27 January near Hellenburg, Germany, a civilian witness saw a bell-shaped object that was "intense black-white with a fiery red trail... [It] was observed for only 3-4 seconds. Exploded before it hit the ground."

In the comments section, an officer wrote: "Everything here suggests that the object was, without a doubt, a bolide (fireball). See Dr Olivier's and Dr La Paz rpts [reports]."

It probably was a meteor, but those reports by Olivier and La Paz were nowhere to be found as the index suggested.

The last one I'll mention here is from Georgetown, Massachusetts, on 8 February 1957. The source is listed as a civilian and an FBI report – which is somewhat curious. The summary says: "A very lengthy report to the FBI, which outlines a number of theories concerning 'flying saucers,' makes only brief mention



of a UFO sighting. A few days after reading books by so-called UFO experts Scully and Keyhow [sic, Keyhoe] source 'saw a group of saucers.'..."

According to the comments: "Only the date is firmly established. Files show no reports of any strange or unusual objects for that particular date or area. Source is obviously a strong believer in 'saucers' which may have colored his very limited report."

This case is revealing, providing clues about the thought processes at Blue Book. Their search of the files was only a search of the Air Force files at Blue Book: if a case was not in their files, then it simply didn't exist, at least to them.

In searching the databases available to me in 2019, I found a listing that suggested that this was a disc-shaped object, but the source for that information was the Blue Book files. There is no indication on the project card of what shape the objects might have been: it only mentions "saucers" and that it was a daylight sighting.

Of course, with my access to many additional databases, I carried the search a little further, but I wasn't able to find anything more on the sighting. Something might be there, especially for those who can access newspaper files.

I will note that most of the cases that are labelled as missing are of the same calibre, which means

that I attach no significance to the fact they are missing. The problem is probably more related to sloppiness rather than attempts to hide anything – because if you were hiding something, you wouldn't list it in the index, noting that it was missing.

This rather quick survey allowed me to see that many of the early cases were, in fact, classified. I found nothing listed as "top secret", but there were many listed as "secret", or "restricted" and, when the classification system was reorganised, as "confidential". Later, most of the files were not classified at all unless there was a national security aspect to them.

So, while some 300 cases are missing, the cases themselves don't seem to be all that important. It shows that those at Blue Book weren't taking their work too seriously. They had reached a conclusion, or their superiors had reached a conclusion, and they weren't going to do anything to suggest those superiors might be wrong.

One thought did cross my mind. When there were inspections of their operation – and there would be inspections – how did they explain the missing cases? Did they blame the earlier administrations... or did the inspectors, knowing the overall opinion of UFOs, just ignore the missing cases? There is nothing to suggest the missing cases were classified, and given that, there probably wouldn't have been repercussions.

The Best of Project Blue Book by Kevin Randle is available now in kindle and paperback from Flying Disk Press: <http://flyingdiskpress.blogspot.com/>

◆ KEVIN RANDLE is a prominent ufologist and author with over 100 books to his name. He has a PhD in psychology and served in the US Air Force and the National Guard, where he held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Korea's cinema of the fantastic

BOB RICKARD welcomes the success of *Parasite* and recommends 12 more Korean films every fortnight should see...

The Korean film *Parasite* recently won the hearts of Western audiences and critics. While the praise is deserved and it's encouraging to see a non-Western, non-Hollywood, subtitled movie so widely appreciated, it was – to me at least – disappointing to see the media taken by surprise by this 'outsider' and pushing it as a 'best' film.

Over the last few decades, the film studios of China, India and Korea (among others) have been producing movie and TV masterpieces of a creative and technical quality that can rival the very best of the West – and often exceed it. While I could give details about the others, I'll focus, here, my 'Top 12' of modern Korean cinema which might interest *FT* readers. They are all movies which, in my view, exceed even the high standard set by *Parasite*, and all did very well in their home market.

Parasite director Bong Joon-ho, of course, made his name with *Train to Busan* in 2016, an inspired take on the zombie genre in which the action, both tense and claustrophobic, is largely confined onboard a non-stop express from Seoul to Busan. Strangely, the undead have taken a strong grip on the Korean imagination, which has exploited them creatively. Even more fascinating is the revelation that the historical form of Korean shamanism – *mudang*, a blend of Mongolian animism, Japanese *Shinto*, and Chinese *Daoism* – is very much alive in modern Korea and the touchstone for anything weird, especially ancient weirdness.



ABOVE: Bong Joon-ho's breakthrough movie, *Train to Busan*. BELOW: The truly epic two-parter *Along with the Gods*.

In the case of *The Wailing* (2016), zombies become a metaphor for social anxiety in a small rural town caused by the coincidental arrival of a solitary foreigner (a mysterious Japanese priest). The main protagonist, a local cop forced to investigate the deaths to save his daughter, seeks help from both modern exorcists and traditional shamans.

The multiplication of zombies, spreading quite literally like a plague, also features in two dramas, both released in 2018 but set in ancient *Joseon*. This dynastic period – which from the 14th century entrenched Confucianism at the expense of Buddhism, Christianity and traditional *mudang* – is the favoured setting for most Korean historical drama and fantasy. In *Rampant*, a prince, returning home after being a hostage in Qing dynasty China, finds zombies taking over the villages while the royal court ignores the threat to their sequestered and privileged way of life. In *Detective K: Secret of the Living Dead*, the title character – played by the

ubiquitous Kim Myung-min – is a riff on the great inquisitor-cum-Sherlock of Chinese literature, Detective Dee. 'K' is also a familiar character for Koreans, having featured in a number of film and TV adventures. Here, he investigates a series of murders in a political intrigue that implicates his father, a court official. What lifts this film out of the ordinary is that, despite its commendably light humour, it delivers a fascinating parable about reincarnation and redemption.

Nor are vampires forgotten. Perhaps the most startling film is the noirish *Thirst* (2009) by *Old Boy* director Park Chan-wook, in which a devout Christian priest develops vampiric tendencies after a medical experiment goes wrong. His agonising attempts to control the unwanted changes in his body and mind eventually give way to acceptance, and the climactic exhilaration with which he embraces his new potential is almost shocking.

The Korean imagination tends to treat science-fiction as





ABOVE: Demon-slaying and derring-do in the stylish historical fantasy of *The Restless*. BELOW: Modern biotech meets traditional belief systems in *The Witch*.

a type of fantasy which allows its directors to experiment with the overlap between the ancient and the new in both technology and phenomena. This fertile melting pot has produced several excellent examples. In *Lucid Dream* (2017) – said to have been inspired by Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* – an investigative journalist employs neurological devices to explore the dreams of suspects in the unsolved abduction of his son. *Psychokinesis* (2018) follows the story of an ordinary man who develops telekinetic powers, which he uses to defend his daughter’s fried-chicken business against unscrupulous property developers. The hero’s superpowers develop when he drinks water from a sacred spring at a mountain shrine, unaware that a meteorite had struck the mountain, passing something alien into the source of the spring.

In my final example of this theme, *The Witch* (2018), a high school student with amnesia seeks answers to her sense of difference, triggering the awakening of super-soldier type abilities. Most of the film is one long fight in which she demolishes the agents of the secret programme that created her. It tells us something about the



Shamanism is very much alive in modern Korea

Korean audience that this heroine is shown to be the product of modern biological technology, yet she is branded as an old-fashioned ‘witch’.

Even *The Host* – another box-office success from 2006 – cannot shake off more ancient associations despite being SF of a slightly harder type. In it, a monstrous mutation emerges from Seoul’s Han River and makes forays into the city. The

family of one of its victims track it down using good old fashioned hunting and sports skills.

My joint penultimate favourites are *The Restless* (2006, aka *Demon Empire*) and *Woochi: The Tao Fighter* (2009, aka *The Demon Slayer*), both about (you guessed it) demon slaying. The first is the tale of a weary swordsman in the royal demon-hunting squad who stumbles into *Joong-cheon*, a spirit world somewhere between Heaven and Hell. It is a stylish cinematic evocation of *wu-shu* and *manga*. *Woochi* is a more traditional fantasy set in 15th century *Joseon*, where *Woochi* is a rascally disciple of a Daoist wizard. Blamed for the theft of a magic pipe, he hides inside a painting, by which means he emerges into the present day, pursued by rat demons and an evil wizard, all seeking the hidden pipe. For me, the highlight comes early in the story when *Woochi*, a master of illusion, creates a stunning vision of a Buddhist deity and his entourage descending from Heaven. This wonderful exposition of religious CGI is, alone, worth the price of admission.

However, top of my list is a truly epic film (in two parts) that excels in every department, with superb production values,

brilliant writing and acting, and a thoughtful plot that never flags. *Along with the Gods*, directed by Kim Yong-hwa, follows a team of three Purgatory judges tasked with proving that a recently dead fireman was truly a good man. His story – taking them through seven trials (or Hells) – forms the first part: *Two Worlds* (2017). In the second part – *The Last 49 Days* (2018) – the *Joong-cheon* judges themselves are investigated. It draws heavily on the distinctive Korean mix of Buddhist, Daoist and Christian mythology without proselytising, and alternates between the intimacy of individual lives and motivations and the Cecil B DeMille-scale landscapes of the otherworldly trials. It is a hopeful movie, full of finely crafted and innovative moments. I’m told that within two months it became the highest grossing film in South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong and will be followed, eventually, by two sequels. It would be satisfying to see this level of Asian cinematic movie-making rewarded with appreciation in the West.

♦ BOB RICKARD started Fortean Times back in 1973. He is currently on lockdown, enjoying more of the best in Asian cinema.

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Rich scents of the past

Lucy R Fisher finds that bad smells, associated with the Devil, were believed to cause disease, and that while people washed and kept clean, toilet manners at Versailles left much to be desired...

Smells

A Cultural History of Odours in Early Modern Times

Robert Muchembled, trans Susan Pickford

Polity Books 2020

Pb, 262pp, £17.99, illus, notes, bib, ISBN 9781509536788

Over 200 years, society moved on from scatological jokes, public excretion and musky scents, developing discreeter manners, better sanitation and flowery perfumes. This can be seen as part of the “progress towards civilisation” idea pushed by earlier historians, says Prof Robert Muchembled. In layman’s terms, “Nobody washed in the Olden Days but we know better”.

However, changes from the 16th century to the 18th were more likely a reaction to current concerns such as urbanisation, the plague, a sense of sin and the competitive marriage market, this book explains.

The story starts with stinks, and the palace of Versailles, where courtiers urinated in corners and latrines were few. Louis XIV’s sister-in-law complained about having to defecate in the nearby forest – but judging by her letters she was obsessed with the subject, upon which she became “extremely coarse”.

To the writer, “humourous” tales about respectable people exposed to incontinent drunks or filthy loo-seats are evidence of a relaxed attitude to bodily functions, but surely the intention was to evoke horrified laughter – or embarrassment?

Chapter Two’s “Pervasive Stench” emanated not just from dunghills outside peasants’ front doors (were they really piled up as a sign of wealth?), or sewage running down city streets. Towns were also home to smelly trades: tanning, soap-boiling, candle-making, butchery. Aristocrats kept their distance, decked out in wigs and starched lace, but the manufacture of wig powder, bleach and starch gave off a horrible odour. No wonder the top people left town for the summer.

Contemporary writers complained, and there were ongoing efforts to reduce the reek. In Paris bonfires were lit to create a pleasant counter-smell. Night-soil men collected excreta, stored it in dumps, dried it out

and sold it on to tanners, dyers and farmers. Raising pigs and other animals in cities was eventually outlawed.

Nasty niffs were associated with the Devil, and thought to cause plague and disease. To escape infection, you inhaled either worse smells (your latrine would do)

or pleasant aromas. Perfumiers did a brisk trade in scented gloves, fans and even boots. “Early modern” people may not have understood germs, but they avoided contagion and followed advice to keep clean. To combat the plague: “Dung heaps should not be allowed anywhere near people, nor should stagnant water.” The doctor’s hazmat suit may have protected him: a long leather robe, a hat, goggles, gloves and a beak-like mask

“We don’t add urine or cow dung to toothpaste or scent any more”

packed with sweet-smelling herbs.

Natural BO was not appreciated, and women were thought to smell worse than men: there was as much misogyny around as there is today. However, it’s a stretch to assume pictures representing the sense of smell have an anti-feminist subtext: “artists chose to depict amorous couples with the woman smelling a rose or ... with a dog’s nose in her lap, which holds a basket of flowers. The poetic appearance hides the true meaning: nothing smells worse than female genitalia.”

In one of these pictures the man is holding his nose, and the caption reads something like “Pooh! Was that you or the dog?”, but surely this is a parody of the familiar emblem?

“Once the threat of plague had faded, the same panoply of scents was used as a form of social display.” The ingredients for anti-plague perfumes are given, and for the more modern flowery scents that might attract a lover, as well as recipes for achieving that peaches-and-cream complexion.

Just as in recent years, young girls were admonished that once you started wearing make-up you had to go on. This wasn’t just a warning against vanity – powder and paint could contain toxic lead and mercury.

However, information is sketchy. The origin of musk, civet and ambergris (glandular secretions of deer and civet cat; whale vomit) is withheld until a later

chapter, and other substances – litharge, realgar, storax – are not explained.

A quick Google search reveals that beauty formulæ have not changed all that much. We don’t add urine or cow dung to toothpaste or scent any more, but the ammonia they contain is used as a bleaching agent. Sulphur, goat’s milk, mercury and arsenic are still employed to treat acne and lighten skin. Early deodorants contained alum, which stops you sweating to this day.

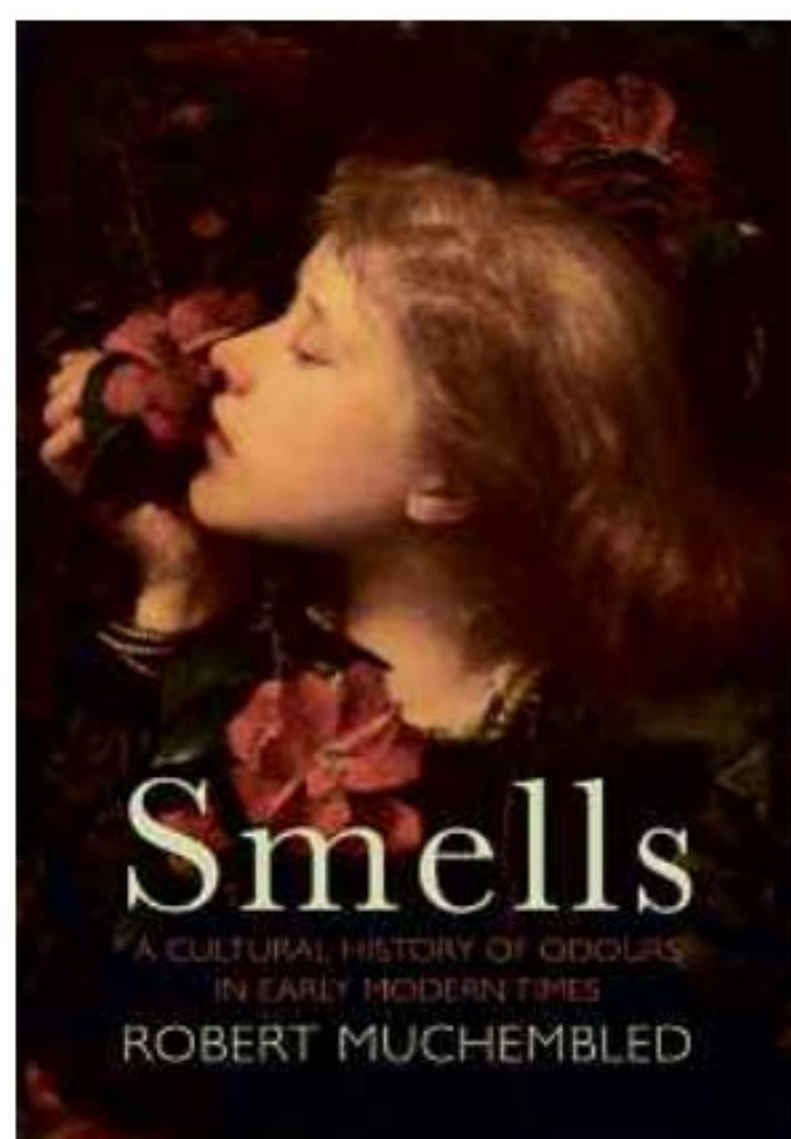
However, the author is not all that interested in the composition or utility of beauty products, preferring to moan about the pressure on women to maintain youthful looks, something else that hasn’t changed. Instead of giving us the inside dope on the 17th-century beauty business, he gloats over squalor, and gives too much space to texts denigrating women as disgusting and odoriferous.

The translation is serviceable, but occasionally baffling. It turns out (thank you, Wikipedia) that a “blazon” is a poem cataloguing “the physical attributes of a subject, usually female”. Poetry is rather clunkily translated, and the French is not given.

Speculation doesn’t always ring true: “Soaps on sale at one sou each suggest water was used sparingly”. Surely a sou is cheap, and suggests that you could use the soap lavishly? A late 17th-century text refers to people bathing once a week – at home or in a bath house. Napoleon’s famous letter to Josephine (“I’m coming home, don’t wash!”) is evidence that people did wash.

Altogether, though, this is an illuminating piece of social history, even if the writer’s conclusions are not always convincing.

★★★



Folk tales falling flat

A disappointing collection of stories: oral narrative doesn't always work well in print

Animal Folk Tales of Britain and Ireland

Sharon Jacksties

The History Press 2020

Hb, 190pp, £12.99, ISBN 9780750991353

No animals were harmed in the making of this book; in fact harmlessness is its guiding light, along with gentle wisdom, love and luck. There's a happy ending for everyone, even the wolves, who are noble spirits of the wild and wouldn't dream of eating small children.

Most of the tales come from original folk narratives of the British Isles – though about a fifth of them seem to have been made up for the story-telling circuit – but they have all been reshaped for a modern morality: feminist, ecological,

humanist. A bit of broad humour gets through the filter, but none of the cynicism of the old villagers, nor their xenophobia, spite and cunning.

Folk horror is absent except in the one story, about a rat army, that was collected directly from oral tradition.

Sharon Jacksties is a popular storyteller who draws eclectically on local legend, fairytale, numskull stories, the Fionn and Arthurian cycles and the *Mabinogion*. She seems to have been stretched by the scope of this book; several stories look as if they're taken from her

regular repertoire with the animal element played up.

Animal Folk Tales is the latest book in a joint project of the History Press and the Society for Story-Telling. They have tried to bring oral narrative back to life for a modern readership, beginning with the English counties and moving onto mythical themes, with mixed results.

Some of their authors successfully harmonised folklore scholarship and performance skills; some just played fantasy games with local history; and some seem to have picked a county at random and retold

anything they'd heard on the circuit as if it were regional lore.

Not every teller is a good writer, and vice versa – the quirks that work with a live audience don't necessarily transfer to the page, but if you leave them

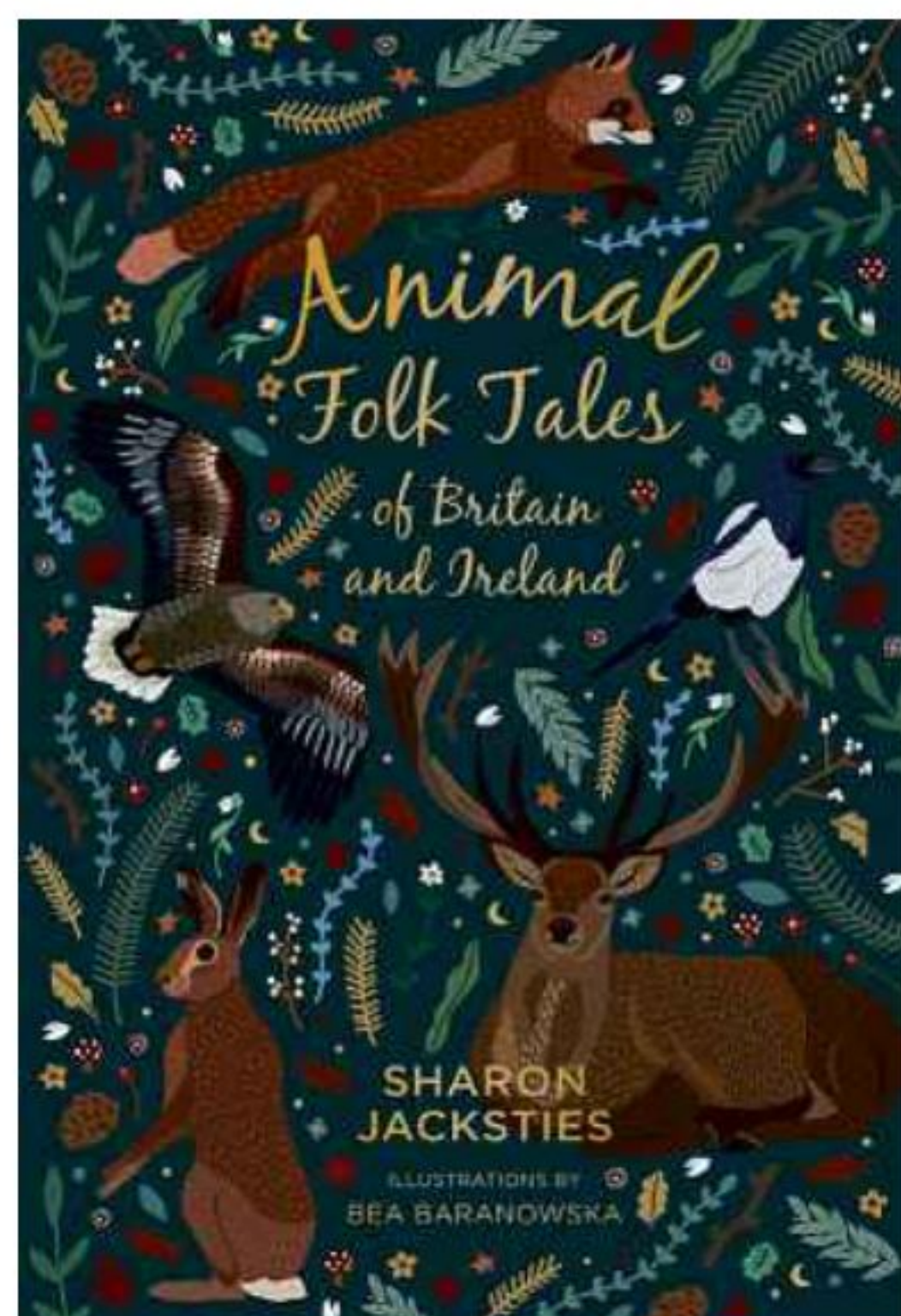
out the style drifts towards *Jackanory*.

Besides, epic and fable and comical folktale are delivered in very different styles in English, let alone Irish and Welsh, so that when a book like *Animal Folk Tales* tells them all in much the same manner, they fall a little flat.

Perhaps it would enchant a first-time reader who had never heard anything like these stories before. But to anyone who has, this book says more about the culture of 21st-century storytelling than about folk narrative itself.

Jeremy Harte

★★★



Divine Rascal

On the trail of LSD's Cosmic Courier, Michael Hollingshead

Andy Roberts

Strange Attractor Press 2019

Pb, 301pp, £16.99, illus, bib, ind, ISBN 9781907222788

Given the red herrings that are to be found on the many roads travelled by Darlington-born Michael Shinkfield (later Hollingshead), Andy Roberts has done an incredible job in appraising the unruly life of a resolutely mercurial character who reputedly introduced (among many others) Timothy Leary, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and the Beatles to LSD.

Born in 1931, Hollingshead's early life culminates in his despatch to a correctional school aged 14 following an incident at school about which little is known. This early trauma, it is suggested, and his exposure to domestic abuse, arguably dictated how he later conducted his marital and business affairs. After a stint in the RAF he worked as a travel agent in London where he met John Beresford, a doctor who would later play a crucial role in the birth of psychedelic culture. Later in 1951 we find him pursuing a successful media career in Denmark, married and a father. However, by 1959 he abandons his family and returns to London where he befriends the playboy Desmond O'Brien and the heroin-addicted writer Alex Trocchi.

For many it is Hollingshead's hallucinogenic messianism that is of primary interest and *Divine Rascal* documents his personal discovery of LSD in detail. Having reinvented himself as an Oxford-educated gent (cue name change) and finding himself resident in New York around 1960, Hollingshead contacts his old friend John Beresford, also in New York, and finds employment with the alleged MI6/CIA front, the Institute for British-American Cultural Exchange. Using Beresford's medical credentials, Hollingshead's purchase of the "magic gram" from Sandoz Laboratories and its impact upon the burgeoning psychedelic scene is covered in detail by Roberts. Hollingshead's first "trip" proved life-changing, and prompted by

mescaline aficionados such as Aldous Huxley, he sought out the experimental scientist Timothy Leary. Initially uninterested in LSD, Leary viewed Hollingshead with suspicion, and it was only after Hollingshead threatened suicide that he agreed to meet him. The curious relationship between Hollingshead and Leary is forensically documented, and Roberts's descriptions of Hollingshead's jockeying for position amongst Leary's devotees demonstrate a disturbing propensity for self-preservation.

Much is made of Hollingshead's delusional personality as he increasingly dictates the agenda of Leary's Castalia Foundation at Millbrook and Beresford's research group, the Agora Scientific Trust; understandably his behaviour alienated his fellow journeymen. Heading up the World Psychedelic Centre in Belgravia, London, to promote Leary's work, Hollingshead's diminishing

popularity suffered further following his imprisonment for possession in 1966. He was banged up for the Summer of Love, with only superspy George Blake to reminisce with. Roberts's account of the post-prison Hollingshead exposes the

psychological frailty of a man desperate for recognition above all else.

By the late Sixties, Hollingshead had partially recuperated his radical chic. Time spent in Norway following his release from prison proved emotionally beneficial but once again he abandoned his domestic responsibilities to be with Leary and pursue his hallucinogenic mission with the Brotherhood of Eternal Love in late 1967. The latter part of his life was governed by an incessant restlessness and drug dependency which Roberts relates with an affective distance. His exploits in Kathmandu, for example, exemplify an unhealthy combination of self-aggrandisement and creativity whereas his attempts to establish himself as head of a sacramental LSD cult, the Free High Church, in Scotland in 1970 suggest a man consumed by solipsism. Articles in the "head" magazines *High Times* and *Home Grown* kept his name alive and provided a





regular income, but interest in his life proved insufficient to ensure the success of his autobiography. With his star waning, a last-ditch attempt to secure his name amongst the countercultural pantheon proved to be little more than an attempt to scam Marvel Comics! His death in Bolivia in 1984 sadly came as no surprise to his wife, son and daughter Vanessa, now an American actress and comedian, who told Roberts to write her father's story "warts and all".

Roberts's biography is a sympathetic and honest account of a damaged and vain man indelibly marked by traumatic childhood experiences.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

Scientifica Historica

How the World's Great Science Books Chart the History of Knowledge

Brian Clegg

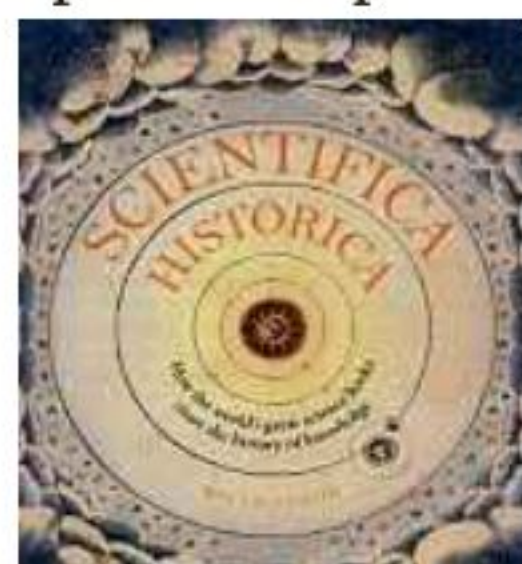
Ivy Press 2019

Hb, 272pp, £25, illus, ind, ISBN 9781782408789

Despite the rise of videos and other media, the written word remains the fount of scientific knowledge. In this beautiful book, Clegg eloquently charts scientific writing's development from clay tablets to e-books. But *Scientifica Historica* also shows that when communicating science, a picture is worth at least 1,000 words. Indeed, this review took longer to write than usual: the pictures kept distracting me!

Scientifica Historica is more than eye candy. Clegg traces science's

evolution beginning with Mesopotamian clay tablets from about 1800 BC, which recorded astronomical observations and other data that helped form the foundations of calendars and astrology. Over the centuries, however, many natural philosophers and scientists kept their findings and theories to the select few: they often communicated in Latin, which few of the general public understood.



Indeed, Clegg comments, until the 1960s many scientists frowned on books that were "too popularist". Some researchers felt that writing for the public was "an unworthy role for a true scientist". But some made science accessible. *The Botanic Garden* by Erasmus Darwin – Charles's grandfather – includes a couple of poems "to make scientific ideas more approachable to the audience".

Any book of this type is subjective. Broadly, however, my list of great science books agrees with Clegg's far more often than not. In any case, I'd hate a book such as this to be identical to my preferences. Clegg's perspective – similar enough to mine to be reassuring, different enough to be challenging – was one of the book's delights. As a guide to the development and current state of popular science writing, *Scientifica Historica* is insightful, delightful and visually stunning.

Mark Greener

★★★★★

Chaos

Charles Manson, the CIA and the Secret History of the Sixties

Tom O'Neill with Dan Piepenbring

William Heinemann 2019

Hb, 528pp, £20, plates, notes, ind, ISBN 9781785152078

Charles Manson and the mythology surrounding him is the gift that keeps on giving. Contemporary attempts by writers such as Vincent Bugliosi to neatly pigeonhole Manson's anti-capitalist, racist philosophy and killings as attempts to start a race war might have fitted the social and political context of late Sixties America, but O'Neill's 20-year investigation, which systematically peels back layer after layer of hitherto accepted narratives, makes a strong case there was much more to Manson's story.

O'Neill identifies the loose ends, picking them up and following them where they lead. This can be a tad confusing at times, and some may see O'Neill's approach as an exercise in join-the-dots journalism, but in choosing to look at the evidence with fresh eyes he raises numerous questions and offers testimony which suggests Manson was in some way protected by the authorities and allowed if not encouraged to do his grisly work.

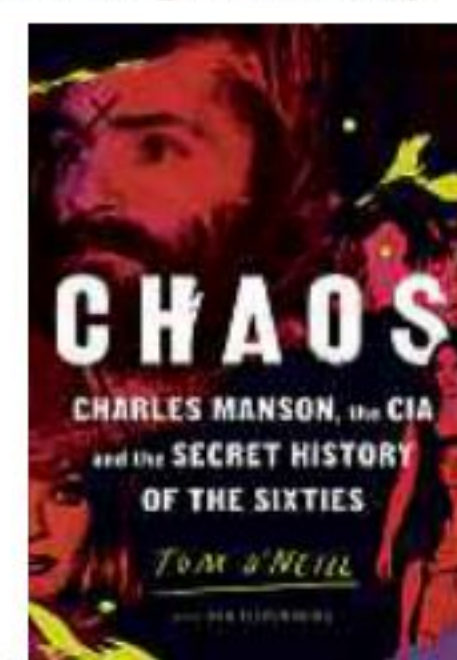
Why? O'Neill has unearthed information suggesting Manson had links with covert CIA infiltrations of the hippie counterculture, develops the notion that the decadent Hollywood elite were much closer to Manson than previously thought and brings the chilling idea of cultural mind control to life.

O'Neill himself becomes a character in his dogged, decades-long search for Manson truths and the reader will feel for him as he finds new evidence only to have it dwindle to nothing or is frustrated by what appears to be a wall of secrecy surrounding aspects of the story. He could have so easily given up, but we should be glad he didn't.

However many Manson books you've read, you'll find something new and of interest here, and while *Chaos* raises as many questions as answers it adds to the growing number of histories which cast a darker shadow over the accepted but simplistic love-and-peace narratives of the psychedelic Sixties.

Andy Roberts

★★★★★



Heliogabalus

or, the Crowned Anarchist

Antonin Artaud

Infinity Land Press 2019

Hb, 196pp, £25, ISBN 9781916009110

In AD 218, a 14-year-old Syrian lad called Varius Avitus Bassianus arrived in Rome as the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Pius Felix Augustus, known to history by the name of his god, Elagabalus ("Greekified" as Heliogabalus). He brought with him the black phallic stone from Emesa in Syria, the cult symbol of his god, "worshipped as though it were sent from heaven". A great new temple to house it – the so-called Elagaballium – was built on the Palatine Hill. Every day at dawn, the teenage emperor would sacrifice large numbers of cattle and sheep at the temple's altars.

He aimed to impose monotheism, with all other gods merely slaves or attendants of his Sun god. A huge temple of the Sun was built on Rome's outskirts.

Each year at midsummer, the black stone was conveyed here from the Elagaballum, borne in a chariot drawn by six white horses, the emperor running backwards in front of the chariot holding the reins, so as not to turn his back on the god.

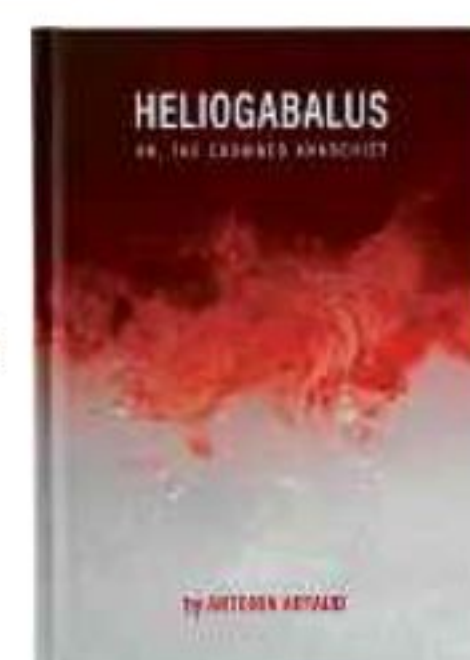
He was a bisexual transvestite, and a pioneer of gender reassignment – he tried to get doctors to "contrive a woman's vagina in his body by means of an incision". Gibbon said he "abandoned himself to the grossest pleasures with ungoverned fury". After four years spent deriding and dismantling the empire's power structures, he was slaughtered by his own guards, fed up with his capricious rule. His headless body, and that of his mother, Julia Soaemias, were thrown in the Tiber.

Stephen Barber tells us that the dissident surrealist poet Antonin Artaud, instigator of the Theatre of Cruelty, "effortlessly out-imagined and out-hallucinated André Breton, while ridiculing his political affiliations." In the ominous year of 1933, which began with a mad Austrian corporal elected German Führer, Artaud's publisher proposed he write about Heliogabalus. The result was this book, translated by Alexis Lykiard and published in an elegant edition by Infinity Land Press. "The life of Heliogabalus is theatrical," Artaud wrote. "But his theatrical

way of conceiving existence strives to create a true magic of the real. Indeed, I do not conceive of theatre as separate from existence." He said he had written the book "to unlearn history a little; but, all the same, to find its thread." It reflects his preoccupations with the occult, magic, Satan and a range of esoteric religions. It's an embodiment of himself and of his own insurgency in art. Three years after its publication, he was locked up as a lunatic, emerging only shortly before his death in 1948. As the book's blurb says, "*Heliogabalus* is simultaneously his most extreme, revolutionary and deranged book".

Paul Sieveking

★★★★★



The wisdom of equations

From Neptune to the neutrino: stories of how “sitting and thinking” has come up with ground-breaking scientific predictions

The Magicians

Great minds and the central miracle of science

Marcus Chown

Faber & Faber 2020

Pb, 294pp, £12.99, notes, ind, ISBN 9780571346394

The Universe Speaks in Numbers

How modern maths reveals nature's deepest secrets

Graham Farmelo

Faber & Faber 2020

Pb, 320pp, £10.99, notes, illus, ind, ISBN 9780571321827

It's conventional to say that for a theory to qualify as “real science” it has to come from practical observation and experiment, not just sitting and thinking, which is what mystics and pseudoscientists do. As striking as that view is, it's not true. Some of the greatest discoveries in physics have been made by people sitting at a desk with pen and paper, rather than looking through a microscope or telescope. That's one of the themes shared by these two books.

The other theme is that “the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics”, as Farmelo quotes Galileo as saying. Neither book contains any maths as such, but narrative accounts of important discoveries that happened to be prompted by mathematical musings. There's a difference between the “sitting and thinking” you or I might do and that of people like James Clerk Maxwell, Albert Einstein and Paul Dirac, who all feature prominently in both books. Their genius lay in developing mathematical equations to describe known phenomena, and then spotting that those same equations predicted new, hitherto unsuspected phenomena – which, when searched for by experimentalists, turned out to exist.

Despite the similarity of subject matter, the two books are very different in style. Chown is an experienced pop-science

author, who has also written science fiction, and *The Magicians* is as enjoyable an account of physics history as you'll find anywhere, often reading more like a novel than non-fiction. Farmelo is a professional physicist, and while his writing is competent and readable, it's much more pedestrian. Compare this from Farmelo – “the mathematics enabled creative theorists to make many precise and surprising predictions about the real world” – with this from



Chown: “The central magic of science [is] its ability to predict the existence of things previously undreamt of which, when people went out and looked for

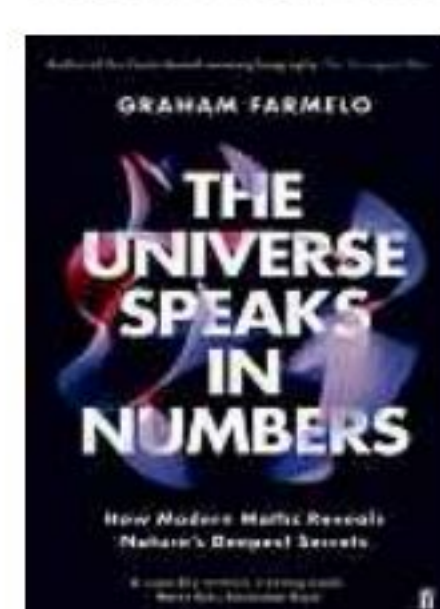
them, turned out to actually exist in the real universe”. They're essentially saying the same thing, but I find Chown's version far more exciting and inspiring.

Chown's book is divided into nine self-contained chapters, each dealing with a specific prediction and its experimental verification – often many decades later – with the two narratives woven together in non-linear style. The first chapter deals with the discovery of Neptune in 1846, following a prediction of its existence by the mathematician Urbain Le Verrier. As the astronomer Flammarion wrote: “Without leaving his study, without even looking at the sky, Le Verrier had found the unknown planet solely by mathematical calculation.” After that, there's Maxwell's prediction of radio waves and their subsequent discovery by Heinrich Hertz, followed by many of the key moments in 20th and 21st-century physics, from antimatter and black holes to the Higgs boson and gravitational waves. In some cases, the prediction was so bizarre that experimentalists were highly sceptical it would ever be verified. A case in point was the elusively tiny subatomic particle called the neutrino – “a fleeting

ghost that barely haunted the world of physical reality”, as Chown puts it – which was considered such a dubious proposition that the search for it was dubbed Project Poltergeist.

The “magicians” of Chown's title are the theoretical physicists who wrote down the equations which eventually proved so useful, but I can't help thinking the real protagonists are the equations themselves. Chown quotes Heinrich Hertz: “One cannot escape the feeling that these mathematical formulas have an independent existence and an intelligence of their own, that they are wiser than we are, wiser even than their discoverers.” Paul Dirac, whose equation predicted the existence of antimatter, puts it even more bluntly: “My equation was smarter than I was”.

The first third of Farmelo's book covers similar ground to Chown's, but then it goes off into murkier and more controversial territory – the modern trend for mathematics-driven research, such as string theory, which is admired more for its formal elegance than its practical usefulness. Farmelo traces this



idea back to Dirac too, who argued that “the research worker, in trying to express the fundamental laws of nature in mathematical form, should strive for mathematical beauty” and that “the rules which the mathematician finds interesting are the same as those which nature has chosen”.

In summary, Chown's book is a brilliant read that should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the history of ideas. Farmelo's book has more limited appeal, but if you're a fan of abstract science like string theory you may want to check it out.

Andrew May

★★★★★
★★★

UFO Witness Sightings

An illustrated dossier of alien encounters

Peter Brookesmith

Amber Books 2019

Pb, 176 pp, £14.99, ind, ISBN 9781782748908

The name of the game for publishers of UFO books today is to recycle their greatest hits for an audience of curious newcomers. This book first appeared in 1995 under the title *UFO!: The Complete Sightings Catalogue* by Peter Brookesmith, editor of the 1980s partwork *The Unexplained* and FT's *Flying Sorcery*. It was one of a series of coffee-table books commissioned by Blandford Press to satisfy one of the periodic revivals of interest in all things UFO. It stood out from the crowd by the quality of its writing



and the neutral stance taken by the author in providing a clear, chronological account of unusual sightings from Roman times to the modern era

of *The X-Files*, alien abductions and Roswell.

But the phenomenon did not end in 1995 and the contents of Brookesmith's book have been recycled with a new chapter covering “the Modern Era” written by Johnny Dee. Much has happened in the past 25 years and it is inevitable that the choice of stories shoehorned into this final chapter reflect current obsessions such as the sightings by US naval personnel from the *USS Nimitz* in 2004 – currently unexplained – and past controversies such as the Phoenix Lights and the Channel Islands UFO from 2007, the last high-profile report from the UK. Dee continues the neutral, even-handed commentary. But in his account of “the Dudley Dorito” he uses the Petit-Rechain photograph, taken during the Belgian flap of 1990, to illustrate the popularity of triangular-shaped “craft” in the 21st century. If he had done his homework by reading *Fortean Times* (FT281:30) he would know this photograph was a prank by a 20-year-old photographer who used a Styrofoam model.

As always when selecting UFO books, *caveat emptor*.

David Clarke

★★★★★



ALSO RECEIVED | WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTEAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

The Road to Pascagoula
A Research Trip – 1981

Stephanos Panagiotakis
Flying Disk Press, 2018
Pb, £8.50, pp125, illus, bib. ISBN 9781728817569

In June 1981, Panagiotakis – a young Greek UFO researcher – travelled to Florida to interview Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker, the two key witnesses of the famous event in October 1973 when both men went fishing near an old shipyard at Pascagoula, on the southern coast of Mississippi. Their lengthy encounter with strange alien entities became one of the most talked-about cases of the time, but the psychological and social stress it inflicted affected both men differently. Parker withdrew, but Hickson was happy to share his account with investigators. Panagiotakis presents an extensive first-hand account of an intimate transformative experience. His engaging narrative will not impress die-hard ‘skeptics’.

Cosmic Womb
The Seeding of Planet Earth

Chandra Wickramasinghe & Robert Bauval
Inner Traditions, Bear Co, 2018
Pb, £16.99, 408pp, illus, colour plates, notes, bib, index. ISBN 9781591433071

The deeply ancient notion of the cosmic origin of Earthly life is here discussed by the venerable professor of astronomy and the experienced Egyptologist. Each provides for the other a celestial or terrestrial prism through which to view and interpret each other’s expertise. They join to show how the ancient temple builders of Egypt and India may have deduced and incorporated into their art and culture the idea of transfer of genetic material through stellar space and thence to triggering life on a new world.

The Final Choice
Death or Transcendence?

Michael Grosso
White Crow Books, 2017
Pb, £11.99, 208pp, gloss, refs. ISBN 9781786770295

A book from Michael Grosso is always worth waiting for; this one being a revision and exan-

sion of the 1985 edition that declared his belief that “we are not just irreducible mental beings but participants in the life of one great mind”. Over that period there has been a huge expansion of data in the field of near-death experiences and related phenomena, much of which Grosso surveys and incorporates into his view. The result is well worth reading – or re-reading – for his analysis and the myriad connections across many times and cultures that he makes. His conclusion is more spiritual than philosophical, discussing the eponymous final choice that divides humanity’s two great tribes: those for whom death is the end and those who see the possibility of transcendence.

Portal
A Lifetime Of Paranormal Experiences

Adele Casales Rocha
Flying Disk Press, 2017
Pb, £12, 193pp. ISBN 9781791526023

On the face of it this is yet another personal account of someone’s ideas about UFOs, hauntings and other paranormal phenomena, seasoned with a few of their impromptu investigations and the experiences of friends or clients. The author in this case is a Filipina (now residing in the USA) and it is her accounts of cases in the Philippines – where its unique Spanish-Japanese heritage influenced its native lore – that lifts this book out of the ordinary. Sadly, there is little here that can be used satisfactorily in evidence of anything ‘paranormal’.

Evolving Brains, Emerging Gods
Early humans and the Origins of Religion

E. Fuller Torrey
Columbia University Press, 2017.
Pb, £20, 312pp, illus, notes, index. ISBN 9780231183376

Torrey – a neuroscientist and director of the Stanley Medical Research Institute – takes on the human need for religious and mythological ideas about

deities creating mankind and the world. Basing his argument on current neuroscience, primatology, and child development studies, he finds the answer within the human brain. As a by-product of evolution, our autobiographical memory has developed the ability to project ourselves backward and forward in time, giving rise to the notions of externalised deities. Those already sceptical of materialistic rationalisation will not be amused...

Flash Time
The Discovery and Meaning of Cyclic Time

Jules Boles
British Gemmological Institute, 2018
Pb, £19.95, 239pp, illus, colour plates, gloss, bib. ISBN 9781999712099

Boles presents his far-reaching theory of ‘cyclical time’, threatening to “overturn theories” and “change the work of Einstein, Hawking, Darwin and others”. With self-assured “ease”, some humour and “a tornado of facts”, he asks some suitably impudent questions – such as why have only 653 dinosaur specimens been found when there should be “trillions”? Regardless of how you feel about theory-mongering by ‘upstarts’, this is a well-written tirade, bound to get narrow-minded scientists fuming.

Behold: Shocking True Tales of Terror
And Some Other Spooky Stuff

Rick Hale
BeulAithris Publishing, 2018
Pb, £6.99, 233pp. ISBN 9781728829548

Hale, a self-proclaimed “seasoned paranormal investigator”, offers 13 chapters of him “battling dark entities” on locations around Chicago. His accounts are rambling and shallow, with remembered conversations ‘novelised’. There are no references and nothing in the way of corroborative evidence, so nothing can be cited in any useful way. The poorly typeset and poorly proofed contents (half the book’s page numbers are missing) are further disadvantaged by a shockingly amateurish cover.

King Arthur
The Making of the Legend

Nicholas J Higham
Yale University Press, 2018
Hb, £25, 392pp, colour plates, maps, notes, bib, index. ISBN 9780300210927

Quite possibly the definitive book on the man, the myth, and the brand. Professor Higham provides a thoroughly detailed analysis of all the facts on the ‘real’ Arthur that you are ever likely to need; documents all the historical narratives; deconstructs the king’s life, character and acts as portrayed in many arts and entertainments; and searches for the origins of the archetypal legend in ancient Asia Minor. Yet he manages to present all this in a style described as “riveting”.

Donovan Mu
Essays About Ancient and Alien Methods Crerating Cartography

Tomas London
Self published, 2018
Pb, £4.99, pp147, illus, ISBN 9781723811098

This must be one of the oddest books to come our way. Subtitled ‘Essays about ancient and alien methods creating cartography’ it oscillates between antiquarian and New Age historiographies, freely experiments with fiction and theories of ancient civilisations, both terrestrial and alien and from the past and far future. It also draws upon exobiology, space science, lost continents, ufology and Theosophy. The author is obviously intelligent, erudite and invested in his disparate ideas but his stream-of-consciousness presentation, in racing ahead, will leave many readers behind.

Apostle to Mary
Magdalene

Julie de Vere Hunt
Self published, 2018
Pb, £9.99, 101pp, bib. ISBN 9781782814610

An ‘Aquarian’ meditation on the importance of Mary Magdalene interpreted through Theosophical and Gnostic philosophies, presented in the form of an alphabet. Despite being well written, this slender book has very little detail.

SEND REVIEW DISCS TO: FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 71602, LONDON E17 0QD, UK.

Rule Britannia!

An utterly bonkers and very swearsy romp through the Roman invasion of Britain in which the veil between the mundane and the magical is thin and the theme tunes are provided by Donovan



Britannia

Created by Jez Butterworth, UK / USA, 2018-2019

Acorn Media International, £34.99

Is *Britannia* – an everyday story of the Roman invasion of Britain – a travesty of history, or completely bonkers, or one of the very best TV dramas of the last few years? Yes, yes and yes. If you don't have Sky Atlantic (or, for the first series, Amazon Prime) you'll have missed it; now the first two series are available in a DVD box set – and it's wonderful.

In 55 and 54 BC Julius Caesar invaded Britain briefly, then headed back to Rome. Now, in AD 45, the Romans are back, led by General Aulus Plautius (David Morrissey), supported by his old friend, Prefectus Lucius (Hugo Speer) – and this time they're planning to stay. Aulus negotiates with two British tribes, the Regnii led by Queen Antedia (Zoë Wanamaker) and the Cantii led by King Pellenor (Ian McDiarmid), who hate each other even more than they hate the invading Romans. Both plot with Aulus against the other tribe. Brutality, literal backstabbing and double-crossing are standard from everyone. But Aulus has his own way of gaining control of Rome's troublesome new outpost.

The Druids are out of their skull on interesting substances

Lucius complains to him: "The men are spooked enough as it is. They think we're at war with ghosts. We've got mutiny and rebellion up the arse. We are on the brink, and you're out there playing ghouls and fucking goblins!" Aulus's reply sets the tone for both series: "You don't defeat these people by fighting their warriors. You defeat them by fighting their gods."

This is the concept at the heart of *Britannia*. Both tribes, though fiercely independent, believe in the teachings of the Druids and follow their instructions. Led by Veran (Mackenzie Crook), the Druids are out of their skulls on interesting substances much of the time; more startlingly, Druid magic actually works.

The interplay between the natural and the supernatural is the clearest since John James's Romano-British novels half a century ago: the veil between man and the gods, between the earthy and the spiritual, between

mundanity and magic, is very thin. You don't just have visions of gods, you get possessed by them. They are a real presence in the world of *Britannia* – so much so that it's a genuine shock in series two when a Roman soldier starts questioning their existence.

The acting throughout is superb, but two characters stand out. David Morrissey's Aulus is amoral, cruel, yet utterly charming; you can't help loving him, even as he chops the fingers off a female Druid. But the outstanding performance is teenager Eleanor Worthington Cox as Cait, a girl from the Cantii tribe (she played Janet in *The Enfield Haunting*) who has been in training since the age of two. Her initiation into womanhood is interrupted by a bloody Roman attack; she escapes, and becomes the focus of a Druid prophecy: "Sent by the gods, a child. Only through her shall this land be saved... she will grow stronger than kings, wiser than Druids, and she will lead us into the light." Cait is taken on for harsh training by an outcast Druid, Divis (Nicolaj Lie Kaas), shunned because he had been possessed by the evil demon Pwykka.

Britannia has the power to shock viewers in every episode: don't expect every major

character to survive into series two. Without too many spoilers: two years later, Cait's training continues, and she develops into a strong and powerful young person. The Romans have settled in, and Aulus is as brutal and charming as ever; look out for how he deals with Emperor Claudius (Steve Pemberton) in the baths. But the most crucial change in series two is the return of the Druid leader Veran's brother Harka, aka The Dead Man – also played by Mackenzie Crook – causing a split in loyalties for the Druids as the two compete in their dark magic.

With its down-to-earth writing (and much swearing) *Britannia* comes over as utterly real; and despite the huge amounts of blood and treachery – in Aulus's case with a smile on his face as he slits yet another throat – there's also plenty of humour, whether it's the fraught relationship between Cait and her half-mad mentor Divis, or the wonderfully silly romp when a couple of AWOL Roman soldiers spike the water supply in a Roman encampment with magic mushrooms.

One of the most bonkers things about *Britannia* is its theme music: Donovan's "Hurdy Gurdy Man" in series one and "Season of the Witch" in series two. But a couple of episodes in and you couldn't imagine it with anything else. Which Donovan classic will they use for series three? "Mellow Yellow", perhaps? The atmospheric incidental music by Neil Davidge is supplemented by a wonderful variety of mainly Sixties sounds: Fairport Convention, Cream, Blind Faith, Humble Pie and Jackson C Frank's "Blues Run the Game" – and it all, somehow, madly, works.

Grubby, sexy, violent, swearsy, fun – *Britannia* is utterly addictive.

David V Barrett





Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse

Dir Lukas Feigelfeld Favreau,
Austria/Germany, 2019
Arrow Video, £24.99

Last year, Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* told a delirious, Lovecraftian tale of two lighthouse keepers' descent into madness, effectively cementing Eggers' merit as a filmmaker. Before that, of course, Eggers had impressed critics and divided audiences with *The Witch*, an eerie, slow-burning New England folk horror that might not have sat well with fans of more conventional movies, but appealed to those who enjoy slow-building terrors, stunning visuals and a haunting atmosphere; *The Witch* was recognised as something rather special.

Many viewers will find *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse*, a tale set in 15th century Europe, to be a spiritual relative of Eggers's tale of witchcraft and superstition, and there are indeed several parallels to be drawn between the two films' style and tone. However, *Hagazussa* is no rip-off; Lukas Feigelfeld's effort is enthrallingly enigmatic in its own right.

Relying on showing, through stunning visuals, rather than telling, the film's lighting and cinematography segue effortlessly between beauty and terror in a film that's in no hurry to tell you where its suggestive narrative will eventually lead. In keeping with the visuals, the score is primal and droning, emphasising the unease that lurks behind every beautiful image, and the sound design is similarly used to create an unnerving atmosphere that contrasts with the gorgeous Alpine landscapes.

While *Hagazussa* may lack conventional scares, and is perhaps too slow-paced and ambiguous for some, the film is not lacking in nightmarish imagery. Rather than going for shock value, these moments instead elicit something more primal from the viewer, getting under the skin and threatening to haunt the subconscious long after the film has finished – which attests to a level of craftsmanship seldom seen in the world of screen horror.

Leyla Mikkelsen



THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS goes into lockdown armed with a selection of movies perfectly suited for watching during a pandemic

Viral Viewing

The Covid-19 'event' has locked much of the world inside – including me as I write this. It's a surreal and disorientating experience where we seem to be using films and TV shows not just to pass the time, but to cope. I've long argued that scary content helps us process scary experiences, so I'm not shocked to find that gloomy virus films like *Contagion* (2011), *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Outbreak* (1995) are some of the most popular movie choices on streaming services right now. If you've already worked your way through those, here are some additional movie picks, fit for a global pandemic.

Why not start on Netflix with the full-on pestilence of *Black Death* (2010), where Mediæval England is ravaged by the bubonic plague? A mysterious village seems untouched by disease – is the supernatural at work? Sean Bean heads the prestigious cast, along with Eddie Redmayne as the young monk sent to investigate. This effective chiller is an appropriately filthy looking descent into disease and necromancy.

If *Black Death* is at the classy end of virus cinema, then get your retro B-Movie fix with the next few picks. In *Where Have All The People Gone* (1974) on Amazon Prime, Peter Graves and his family are immune to a series of solar flares that turn the majority of Earth's inhabitants into piles of empty clothing. Scenes of them wandering the empty planet feel reminiscent of a once-a-day, state-sanctioned jog through our deserted towns right now. You'll find a similar vibe on Amazon Prime



It's a filthy looking descent into disease and necromancy

with *The Last Man On Earth* (1964) where Vincent Price plays a reluctant vampire hunter in a world newly emptied by plague. Out for Amazon rental is *The Alpha Incident* (1977), in which a train carrying a deadly alien organism is plunged into quarantine. The slow pace might put you to sleep, but we've all got plenty of time to work through it.

Another retro tip could be *The Mad Death* (1983), which is now out on DVD



from Simply Media. This BBC Scotland mini-series showed the effects of a massive rabies outbreak across the UK. Rabies was the on-trend bio-fear at the time, and the opening sequence is particularly spooky: the face of a fox, floating in rippling water, while a child's choir sing 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. Brrr.

Interestingly, more recent virus films tend to focus on home isolation. So do try renting *It Comes At Night* (2017). Here a family are faced with a worldwide virus outbreak and go into lockdown in a secluded woodland. The film hinges on an idea that is freshly terrifying in the current climate: the thought of another family asking to stay with you. Also for streaming rental is *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016) a tightly constructed forteen thriller about a woman who wakes up in the bunker of a suitably swivel-eyed conspiracist John Goodman. He claims she can't leave since the outside world has been contaminated via an 'attack'. Is he right? This clever, tense scenario had me gripped.

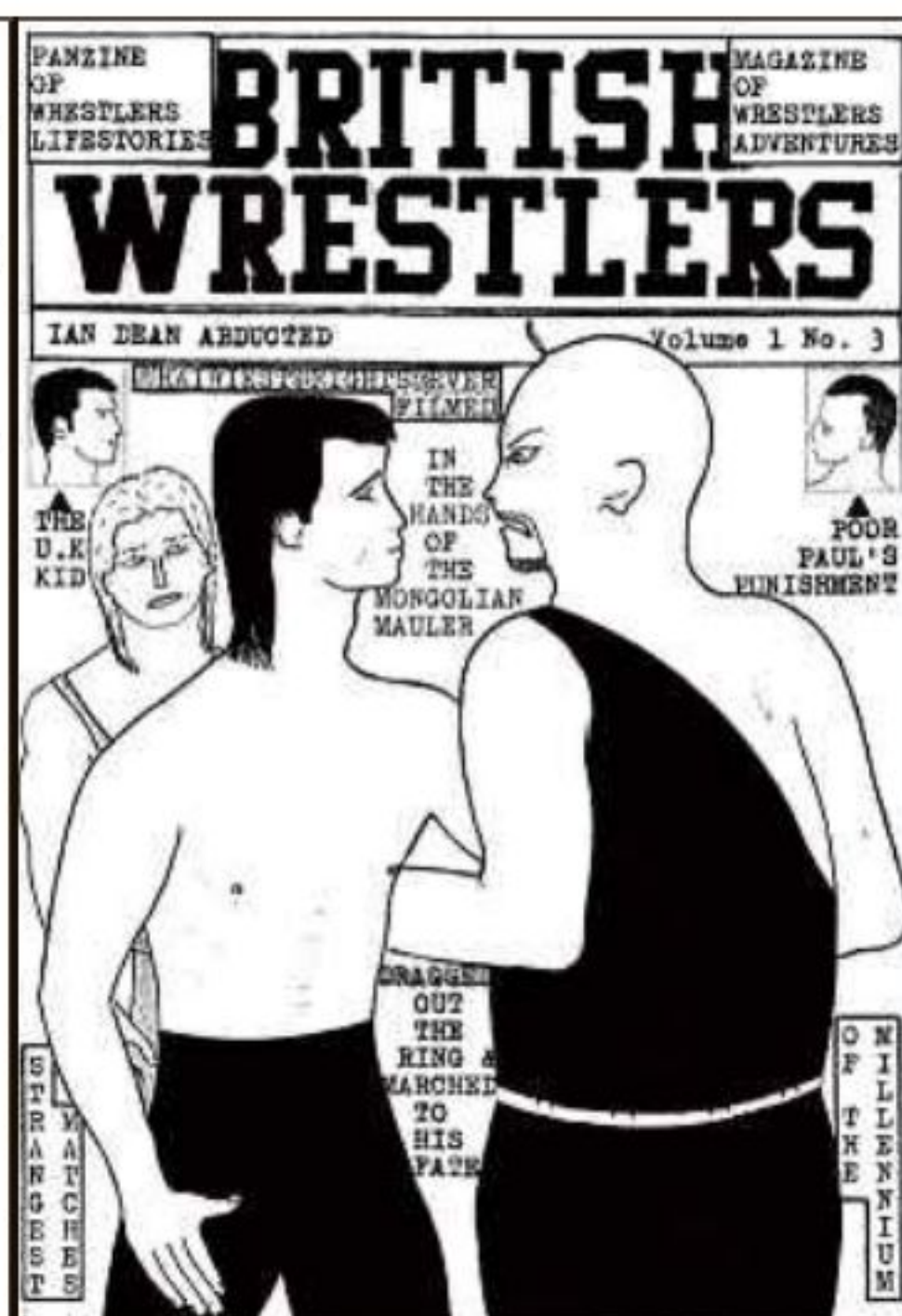
If you're feeling truly claustrophobic, then the following two picks might give you perspective. Streaming on Channel 4 player is *The Descent* (2005), which had me sweating with stress. Six cavers become trapped in a horribly cramped underground cave system... though there's just enough room for monsters to join them. If you really want to zoom it in close, then try *Buried* (2010), a twisted Ryan Reynolds thriller set entirely inside a coffin. Your house will feel like a palatial mansion after watching this.

Other classics worth seeking out include: *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *The Omega Man* (1975) *Masque of the Red Death* (1964) and *Pontypool* (2008).

Final tip: watching any Bigfoot movie is a must at these times... if you want to learn the art of avoiding people from the undisputed master of social distancing.

British wrestling
always had a
dark side.
This magazine
explores it.
Send SAE for details.

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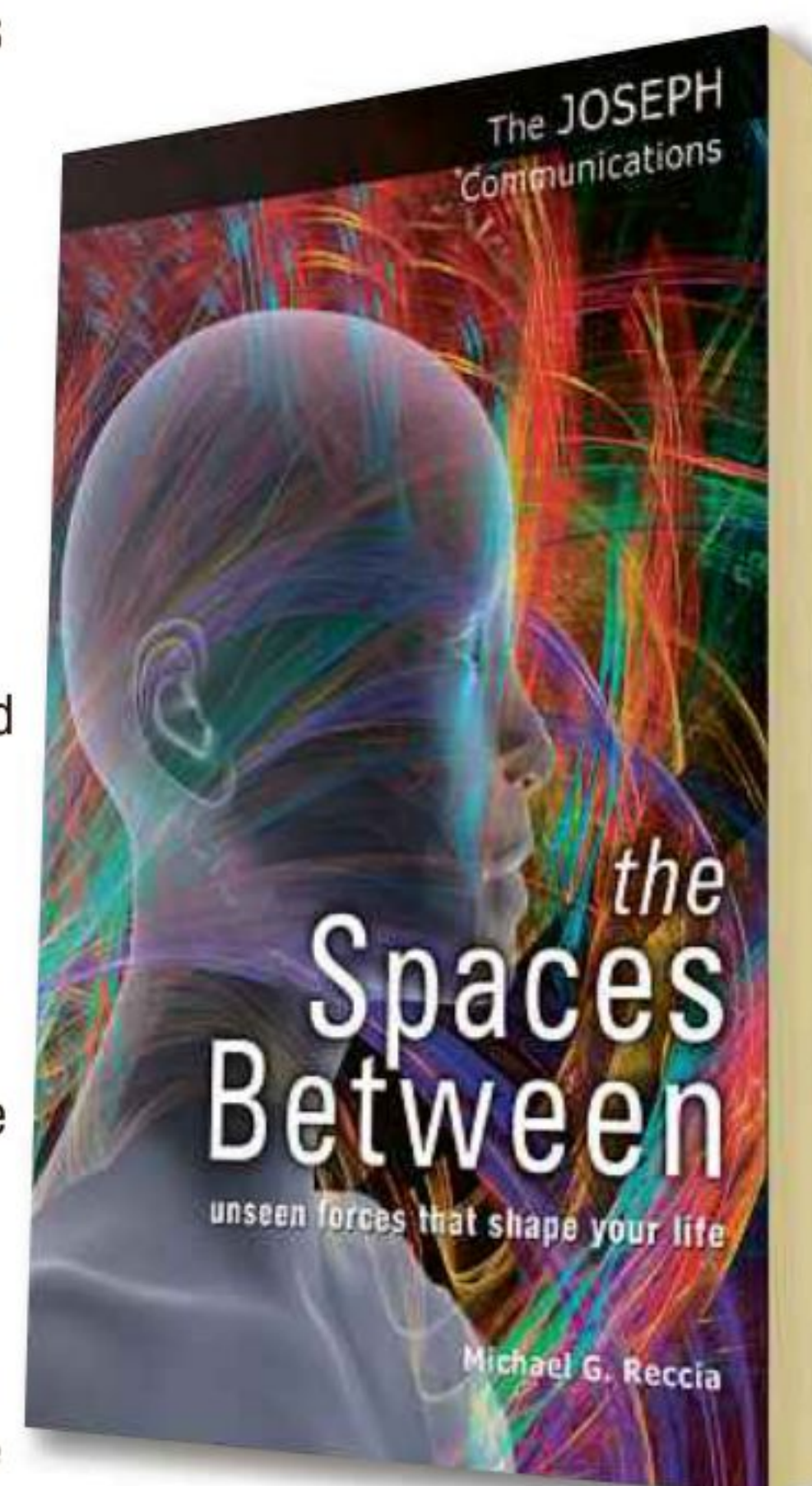
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BY S E R

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"Vandalism Saved Me From A Life Of Crime"

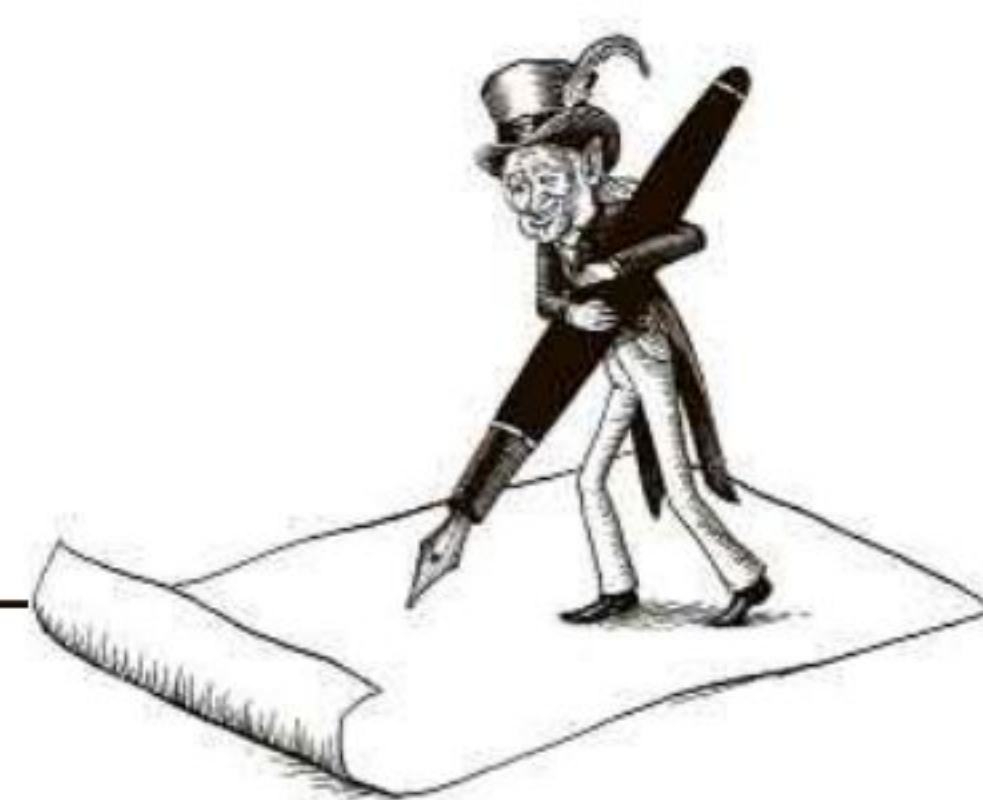
Darren Cullen aka SER

Graffiti Kings founder/head honcho/graffiti vandal/street artist
graffitikings.co.uk - painting graffiti since 1983....



LETTERS

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Cookie cutter

Regarding the mysterious hole in the Washington State wheat field in 1984 [FT390:45], see www.beamsinvestigations.org/cookiecutterphenomenon.htm. It is notable that this earth divot removal is not unique, which rules out mysterious crane operators. The idea that the phenomenon is seismic can be ruled out, but it must be some natural cause. I like the idea that some atmospheric effect ripped the earth upwards and then dropped it a little way away.

Roger Musson
Edinburgh

Sabotage & Moon trash

From 1972 to 1980, I was the file clerk at my local power company. One of my tasks was to maintain the files of transmission-voltage equipment. In those files were “failure reports”, which made great reading.

In about 1963 at Locks Substation in Petersburg, Virginia, a pet monkey got into the 115KV bus work, and most of Petersburg went dark. A year later – to the day, they said – another pet monkey did the same thing. Both monkeys were owned by the same person. During the summer of 1974, Northwest Substation had a 230KV breaker open for no obvious reason. When the crew got there, they found a fried feline. The engineers buried the unfortunate cat just outside the right-of-way, with a cross over the grave. There’s a photo of it in the failure report.

During the cold months, snakes frequently climb into the substations and short out the distribution circuits. It was quite common. Birds were curiously rare causes of power-loss, but squirrels were grossly overrepresented. Raccoons did it sometimes, and at least once there was a frog that somehow hopped onto a 3,200-volt breaker and caused a short circuit.

• The cover story of FT380 (June 2019) concerned odd tales about, and discoveries on, the



Dead bat mystery

While on a birding trip in Colombia last December, we were puzzled to find a number of dead bats on a dirt track in the countryside some distance east of Medellín. There were at least five lying on and around the path in the space of a few metres. Our guide, an experienced local birder and naturalist, had never seen anything like it and could offer no explanation. The scene was reminiscent of the dead starlings found on a road in Anglesey, North Wales, on 11 December [FT388:4, 389:26]. They had apparently crashed while avoiding a raptor, but it is hard to imagine what would have scared bats. A brief search did not locate any similar cases. Have any other readers seen anything similar?

David Hambling, *By email*

Moon. There’s a photo of “an abandoned alien soda can” that doesn’t look like any soda can I have ever seen (page 38). There are ‘shards’ and ‘buildings’, all evidenced in photos agreed to be authentic NASA images. There are monoliths on Phobos (I think I’m remembering that correctly;

it might be Deimos) and on the Moon. With all the stuff that’s been shot out there, why is there no effort to recognise our *own* stuff? We’ve lost more than we’ve landed anywhere. How much of that alien “evidence” is really our hardware swatted down by bad luck, bad software, and unexpect-

ed hardware failure? Odds seem to be fairly good that most of the stuff out there is ours, recent, and not attributable to visits by aliens or to the depredations of the Galactic Ghoul. There may be a place for someone to study the trash we have dropped out there, accidentally and intentionally. It could be an aspect of astroarchaeology, which is on the verge of being recognised as a formal discipline.

Michael Holt
Richmond, Virginia

Ephemeral treasures

Readers who found themselves salivating at the description of the 20th century ephemera amassed by John Townsend [FT390:36-39] would do well to visit The Land of Lost Content Museum in Craven Arms, Shropshire. Here they will find their appetite satisfied with a rich feast of ephemera and a treasure trove of memorabilia. Here they will undoubtedly get to gasp, “We had one of those”, “I remember these” and “I never thought I’d see one of those again”. Arguably the collection has outgrown its premises so now is the time to make the visit.

Revd Andy Froud
Clitheroe, Lancashire

Mount Nebo

Previous articles in *FT* have focused on the link between the 1960s hippie movement and flying saucers. While recently engaged in research into the life and legacy of William Blake, I came across an interesting reference to Blake, hippies and flying saucers.

In 1969, Æthelred Eldridge (born James Edward Leonard Eldridge) the avant-garde painter and Associate Professor at the Ohio University School of Art (1957-2014), founded a commune called Golgonooza where he established the ‘The Church of William Blake – Primal Church of the Blake Revival’ at the foot of Mount Nebo, not far from his home in Athens, Ohio. The church eventually burned down, reportedly due to arson, in 2001.

Eldridge described Mt Nebo as a “hill of vision” and centre

Cloud Circles

I photographed this fallstreak hole (right) in Glastonbury, Somerset, at 2.12pm on 20 December 2018. I was standing on the north side of the Street road (A361) looking due south.

Michael York

Glastonbury, Somerset

I saw the 'cloud circle' [fallstreak hole] below from my car somewhere in the Stafford / Birmingham area on the southbound M6 (so looking west), at 4pm on 2 January 2019. What do you make of the 'echo' of another circle just above it?

Martin Greaney

Shirehampton, Bristol

Editor's note: A fallstreak hole (also known as a cavum, hole punch cloud, punch hole cloud, skypunch, cloud canal or cloud hole) is a large gap that can appear in cirrocumulus or altocumulus clouds. Such holes are formed when the water temperature in the clouds is below freezing, but the water, in a supercooled state, has not frozen yet due to the lack of ice nucleation. When ice crystals do form, a domino effect is set off, causing the water droplets around the crystals to evaporate, leaving a large, often circular, hole in the cloud. The 'echo' circle in Mr Greaney's photo is probably another fallstreak hole.



of spiritual power, its magnetic activity attracting what he described as the "airship of the gods". In the 1973 issue of the commune newsletter, the *Golgonooza Loose Leaf*, attention turned to the skies: "Fiery discs recently known as flying saucers have been sighted frequently in the vicinity of Mt Nebo and directly above the mount". Had Blake been alive, it is tempting to think that he would have seen these 'discs of fire' not as alien visitors but as a company of the heavenly host: "What it will be questioned, when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire, somewhat like a guinea? Oh! No! No! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly

host, crying, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!'"

Rumours soon began to circulate locally of the mountain's uncanny 'energy'; it had been sacred to the Shawnee, had been a centre of Spiritualist activity in the 19th century and was, according to Eldridge, the centre of a "network of tracks and alignments marked by mammoth earthworks, mounds and stones and planned by a divine race...".

David Taylor

Halesowen, West Midlands

Simple logic

Peter Brookesmith seems to be missing a few points in his

UFO column [FT388:30]. It may be true that Brexit and Trump haven't created knuckle-dragging racists, but it has allowed them to crawl out of the woodwork and gain the ascendancy, sprouting and believing in conspiracy theories without checking the facts. The simple (political) science behind this is divide and conquer, instead of unite and overcome our own fears ('The Monsters are due on Maple Street' *Twilight Zone* episode comes to mind as does 'Jason and the Bean Men' in *Twice Told Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, his reworking of some of the Greek myths).

The SNP bullied Charles Kennedy and when the Brexit

referendum was announced on the BBC news, a woman of colour pointed out that someone had shouted out to her: "Get back where you came from". Trump won the Republican vote and indeed the presidential election through bullying (division and conquest again) as Brexit is separating the UK from The European 'Union' and the SNP is causing division in Scotland (attacks upon English people living north of the border) because it wants to sever ties with the rest of the UK. Division is hatred as union is its opposite. This is simple logic and the truth is simple to see in any conflict where 'independence' is sought.

As for the 'Not Enough



Information' point: what do you expect when there is lying on one side and heightened imagination on the other? The government keeps secrets because that is part of its remit (the Official Secrets Act in the UK for instance) and the ignorant make up stories to explain things they don't understand and don't have enough information on to make reasonable guesses, so make unreasonable ones (The Conspirasphere). As for 'Them Old Time Aliens', I do agree that this point has merit (See *Games People Play* by Eric Berne). People want attention from the parental state and when they don't get it, turn nasty.

Tony Sandy
By email

Abbey funding

I feel that Alan Murdie is a little hard on the founding fathers of Torre Abbey [FT382:18]. While a small establishment might have been able to exist without any income, an abbey, existing as it did in a wider cash economy, needed endowments. For example, while quills grew on geese and some of the ingredients of ink grow on trees, the pigments used to illuminate the work of copyists had to be paid for and some of them, most notably lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, were not cheap.

It is doubtful that the monks 'acquired' the fishing rights of Torbay, which implies a deliberate plan of acquisition, and more likely that these were gifted by the current owner as an endowment to the Abbey, though they would not be so otherworldly as to be unaware of the value of the gift. Most abbeys were not supposed to be "removed from the affairs of the world", but existed to monitor the spiritual health and the adherence to law of the local community.

The endowments were made by the local nobility either to enhance their spirituality or in recompense for some major crime or sin. One of the endowments of Arbroath Abbey was made as the result of a murder: "... the third Earl of Angus married King William's sister. Earl Gilchrist unfortunately had a

murderous temper and in a fit of jealousy strangled his lady. The murder turned out to be a good thing for the fledgling abbey, for Gilchrist as a penance gifted Arbroath with the lands of Dunnichen, Kingoldrum and..." (<https://angusfolklore.blogspot.com/2015/11/the-beginnings-of-arbroath-abbey.html>). My wife and I are writing a book on the area of Redhall in which we live, and, from at least the 16th century, the lands of Auchlishie, Hillends and Redhall were occupied as the gift of the commendator of Arbroath Abbey.

Philip Bolt
Kirriemuir, Angus

Conspiracy mind-set

Noel Rooney [FT389:54-5] makes an elegant case that we should take conspiracy theories on their own merits and not question the psychology of those who believe them. I agree with the first proposition but not with the second. I am open-minded about conspiracy theories; I know that conspiracies happen (as demonstrated by the revelation that Volkswagen engineers conspired to falsify emissions data). But all too often believers in conspiracy theories are not as open-minded as Rooney and I are.

Rooney cites other belief systems, from communism through religion to environmentalism and asks why we don't question the psychologies of their adherents. Well, actually, sometimes we do: Galen Strawson theorises that religious believers are narcissists who believe that a Supreme Being is personally interested in them as individuals and their doings. But the point of other belief systems is that they constitute a coherent world-view and a guide to behaviour. They claim to explain the Universe and how we should behave in and towards it. What I believe about the JFK assassination is not going to affect whether I steal or commit adultery.

The starting point of other belief systems is that they are a theory of everything (at least, everything that matters) and claim to explain that everything. Conspiracy theory tends to begin

from a rejection of an existing theory ("It can't have happened that way"; "A lone gunman couldn't have killed JFK") and constructs an alternative model for *how it happened*. If they sometimes turn into theories of everything, they begin from a reinterpretation of a single event (if *they* were out to get JFK, might not *they* be out to get the rest of us?).

Believers derive personal benefit when they find meaning in belief systems that provide an explanation of the Universe and a guide to daily living. I would argue that a committed (rather than a balanced, relaxed) belief in conspiracy theory is often to the detriment of the believer. He/she can lose perspective and develop a warped view of other human beings. For example, take the idea that in the USA gun control supporters could be capable of organising (or faking) a mass killing of schoolchildren to advance their cause. If conspiracy theorists can hold that view of human psychology, shouldn't we be questioning *their* psychology?

Religion, of course, is *revealed*; conspiracies, if they exist, are *discovered*. Rooney writes of finding a plausible case; but a plausible case has to be based on evidence. As I have said, conspiracy theories tend to begin from "It can't have happened that way" – that is, from a rejection of the initial evidence – and so go in search of evidence: and if you look hard enough for evidence, you will usually find it, even when it isn't there. [Seek, and ye shall find – Editor.] Moreover, any evidence-based theory has to be *falsifiable* – that is, further evidence can prove it wrong.

In *The Psychopath Test*, Jon Ronson describes the experience of a victim of the 2005 London Underground bombings who attended a meeting of conspiracy theorists who

claimed that the whole thing was a fake and a cover-up. They rejected her eyewitness evidence because it was inconsistent with the conclusions that they had reached and accused her of being part of the conspiracy. They could not *allow* her to falsify their theory. "If the facts don't fit the theory, the facts must be wrong."

I do not claim that all conspiracy theorists start open-minded and become closed-minded. Some remain open-minded, and some, I suspect, never were. But I think that it is legitimate to ask questions about the psychology of people who commit so strongly to an evidence-based belief system that they become incapable of responding rationally to conflicting evidence and argument – especially when they derive no obvious personal benefit from their belief.

Or do they? Does the theory confirm for them something that lurks in the depth of their personality? Let's leave the last word to Douglas Adams in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

"You know," said Arthur thoughtfully, "all this explains a lot of things. All through my life I've had this strange unaccountable feeling that something was going on in the world, something big, even sinister, and no one would tell me what it was."

"No," said the old man, "that's just perfectly normal paranoia. Everyone in the Universe has that."

Maybe Richard Hofstadter was on the right track after all.

Martin Jenkins
By email



SIMULACRA CORNER

Faces and figures in nature sent in by FT readers



TOP LEFT: Alex Whyles noticed this stone face on Seaview beach, Isle of Wight.

TOP RIGHT: This rock resembling a beached whale was sent to Fortean Towers in February 2017, but we've mislaid the notes on who sent it. If it was you, please let us know!

ABOVE RIGHT: David Byrne noticed this stone sheep on a visit to the Peak District.

ABOVE LEFT: Stan Sweeney saw this rock while out walking near Shotts in Lanarkshire. At first, he thought it looked like a T-Rex, but then it seemed

more like a giant turtle's head.

RIGHT: When Simon Reames of Exeter was on a camping trip in the Charen River Valley in Kazakhstan on the border with China, he noticed many stones bearing animal simulacra. The "shark" in this photograph is a made out of moss.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 66598, LONDON, N11 9EN or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.



IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

Passenger vanishes

I work as a train guard, selling and checking tickets, patrolling the train and operating the doors. I step out onto the platform to ensure that everyone is on, or off, the train safely before departure at each station.

One night a couple of years ago, I had completed several trips and was making the last journey of the evening between Bradford and Ilkley. It was mid-week, and as usual this service was very quiet. After leaving Bradford, I made my way down the train to check tickets and also to see who was on board. I went through the first two carriages, where there were only two or three people. Then I went through the doors into the next carriage, where the toilet is. I came round the inside of the cubicle to see a man sitting on a fold-down seat, with his head back and eyes closed. I thought his unusual pallor and dark rings round his eyes were theatrical make-up. I had a distinctly unsettling feeling about him and decided not to approach him.

I continued through the train and counted the number of passengers on board: six. This way I could count them off at each station and if no one was left on board I could walk to the front between the penultimate station and terminus to do my security check without the need to release any doors and lock them up again. People got off at each station. I counted five off, but the doors where the strange passenger was sitting had not opened and I had not seen him get off.

We arrived at the penultimate station, Ben Rhydding, and logically there was only one passenger left on board: the man with the pallid face. He was obviously going to Ilkley, so I walked down the train intending to open only the door nearest to where he was, although I felt apprehensive



about this. There was nobody there. I checked the toilet and walked into the next carriage, in case he had moved. The train was empty. I have not seen him since. He looked as real as any other passenger.

CB
Yorkshire

Sissinghurst shade

Some years ago, I frequently stayed for three or four days in a large Victorian house in the grounds of Sissinghurst Castle in Kent. I would walk to Cranbrook down an ancient trail and sometimes to Frittenden. I loved to walk at dusk with the dogs. One evening it was just me and Hattie, a border collie. I skirted the large moat and climbed over the stile. We walked down a slope towards the first of two lakes, but we stopped in our tracks when I saw a man on the other side of the lake looking towards us. He was tall, even handsome, and very, very still. His smart tweed suit and matching waistcoat suggested the 1920s or 1930s. There was something unearthly about him and the hairs on the

back of my neck stood up. We turned and hurried away to the stile and 'home'. My hostess agreed it was wise to turn back as nobody should have been there at that time, once the garden had been closed to the public.

Could it have been the shade of someone from the Bloomsbury Group, who often visited Sissinghurst? Vita Sackville-West and her husband Harold Nicholson were perfect hosts and enjoyed the company of family and friends.

Barbara Stevens
Merivale, New Zealand

Missing mouse

Having found a motionless but un-bloodied mouse on the garden path late one afternoon, which I thought to be courtesy of one of my feline friends, I gave it a thorough medical examination, in the form of a quick once-over, and tried my best to revive it with the stroke of a finger and a bit of food placed near its nose. After half an hour there was no change and it looked to be all over for the little creature. I placed it in a small and secure cardboard

box, ventilated with tiny holes in every side, and periodically checked on its progress. Five hours passed and I made my last check on it for the day. It still showed signs of life, but no sign of being conscious, appearing to be in a state of suspended animation. I closed the lid, keeping it in place with a book on top to prevent it escaping, should it revive, straight into the path of a cat. I then placed the box in the cupboard beneath the stairs. The following morning I removed the box, took off the book, and carefully opened the lid. The box was empty. None of the holes in its walls, made with the nib of a pen, was big enough for the escape of a fly, never mind a mouse, and even an adult rat could not have raised the book-weighted lid. Nobody else was in the house that night, and the cupboard door, like the lid of the box, was completely secure, but somehow the furry Houdini beneath the stairs had disappeared.

Stefan Badham
Portsmouth, Hampshire

Damp atlas

We had to buy a new car atlas in 2007 because the existing atlas, normally kept on the back seat, became at first damp and then so wet as to be unusable. No rational explanation could be found – the car was a hatchback, not open to the air, and while there was a bottle of water in the car it was screwed tightly shut and some distance away from the atlas, and below it, on the car floor. There was no water in the car and if rain had got in through the roof it would not have soaked just the atlas.

In July 2009, looking in a sports bag I usually keep in the car, I found a shabby-looking cassette of Brazilian music which neither my partner nor I had ever seen before. Was my car haunted? Or was I?

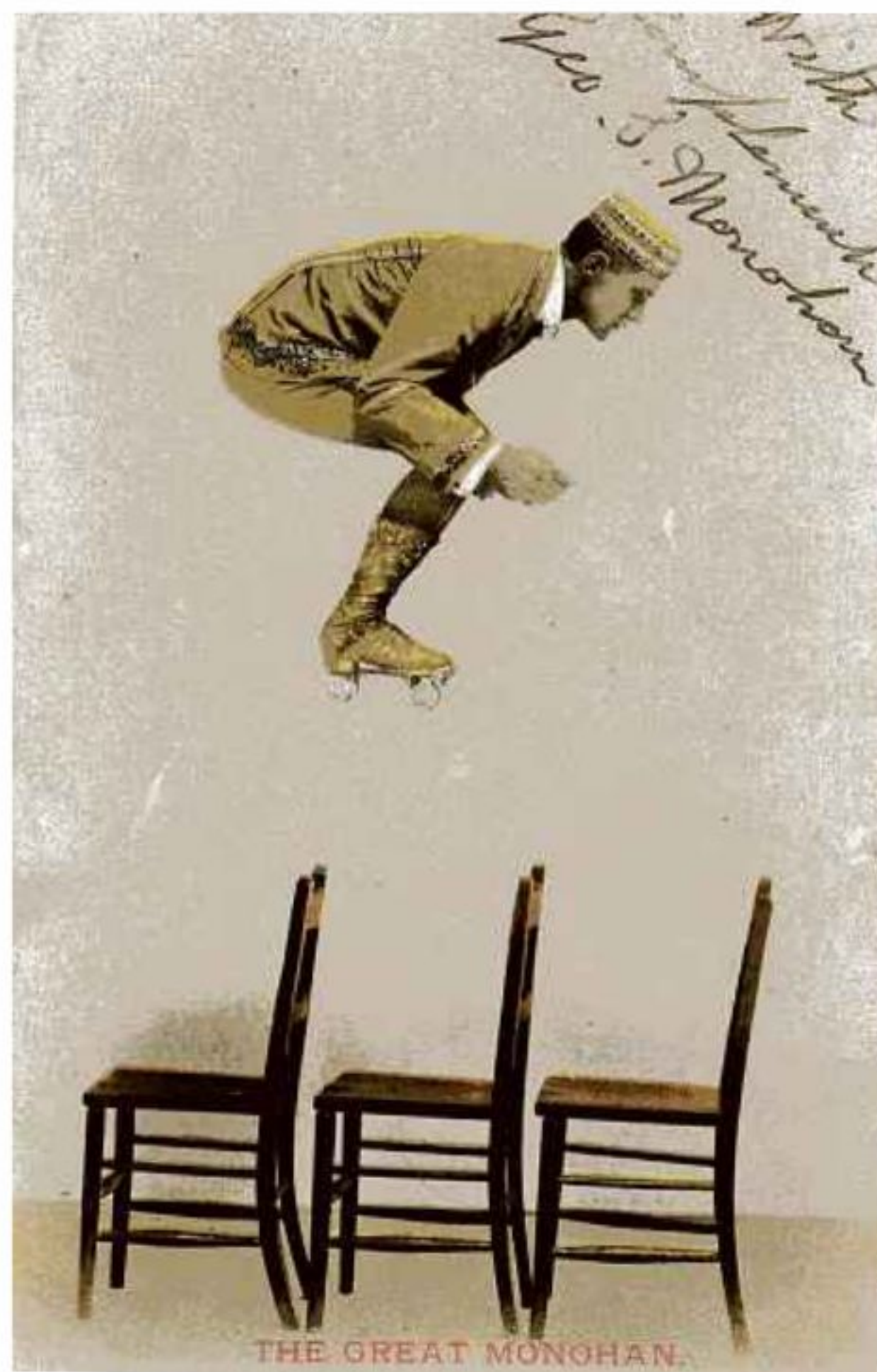
David Gamon
By email

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past recalls the transatlantic craze for roller-skating and the man who was its Evel Knievel



4. THE GREAT MONOHAN



ABOVE: Three attractive colour postcards featuring the Great Monohan, one of them signed by the transatlantic skating phenomenon.

George S Monohan was born in the United States in or around 1880. A short, wiry, agile man, he became a professional roller-skater, performing tricks in America's many skating rinks. Roller-skating was a highly fashionable sport around the turn of the century, and Monohan flourished as a result.

In late 1908, he travelled to Europe, and in December he made his debut at the American Roller-Skating Rink in Dublin. The following month, he was in Edinburgh, before visiting a number of Northern towns, with much success. He dressed in elaborate costumes, and went through a number of daring tricks, like jumping over a row of nine chairs, skating through a maze of lighted candles, or skating on top of a barrel. 'The Great Monohan', as he called

himself with American disdain for modesty, became quite a success in Britain. Every town had its roller-skating rink, and Monohan was in high demand to come and show off his skills. He brought a supply of postcards to sign for his admirers, and these are today quite scarce and sought after, particularly the coloured ones.

The Great Monohan continued touring throughout 1909 and 1910. He offered medals to those who were successful at replicating his tricks, both ladies and gentlemen, although heavy and undignified falls were the order of the day when the amateurs tried jumping the chair or skating on the barrel. In April 1910, he was a success at the Stow Hill Roller-Skating Rink in Newport, a former cinema

situated directly opposite the main entrance to the Union Workhouse (today St Woolos Hospital). He danced on stage and performed the spread-eagle: there was tumultuous applause when the scene was darkened for him to skate through the maze of 16 lighted candles. He sold his postcards and gave the spectators free tips on trick and fancy skating.

During some stage of his British career, The Great Monohan published a short book entitled *Roller-Skating for Novice and Expert*, which he sold while on tour. Back home in America, he had been inspired by 'Baby Ruth' the roller-skating pony, and purchased two four-month-old bear cubs for \$50. He named them Teddy and Buster, and set about training them to skate;

but then he was invited to come to Britain and had to get rid of them. When he returned to the United States, he promised, he would get hold of some young bear cubs and make show skaters of them. The 'Barrel Trick' was his main stunt, and the confident American believed himself to be without a rival in its execution. Nor were any of his adversaries in the roller-skating world capable of jumping over a row of nine chairs, and most amateur skaters could not even manage one.

His nearly three-year tour of Britain ended in Dover in September 1911, after which he carried on his skating career in the United States throughout 1912 and 1913. As the craze for roller-skating faded away, so did Monohan's fame.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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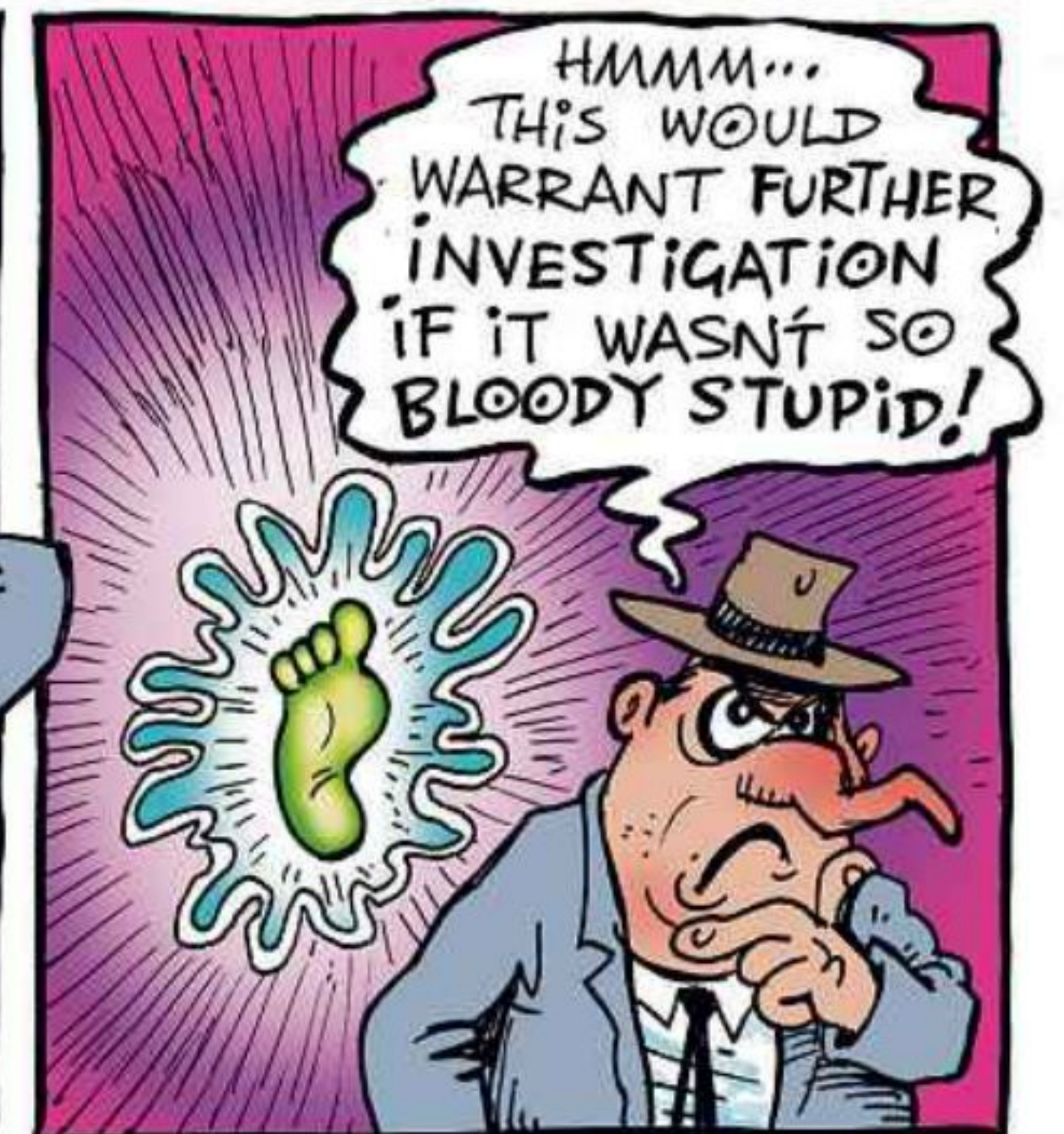
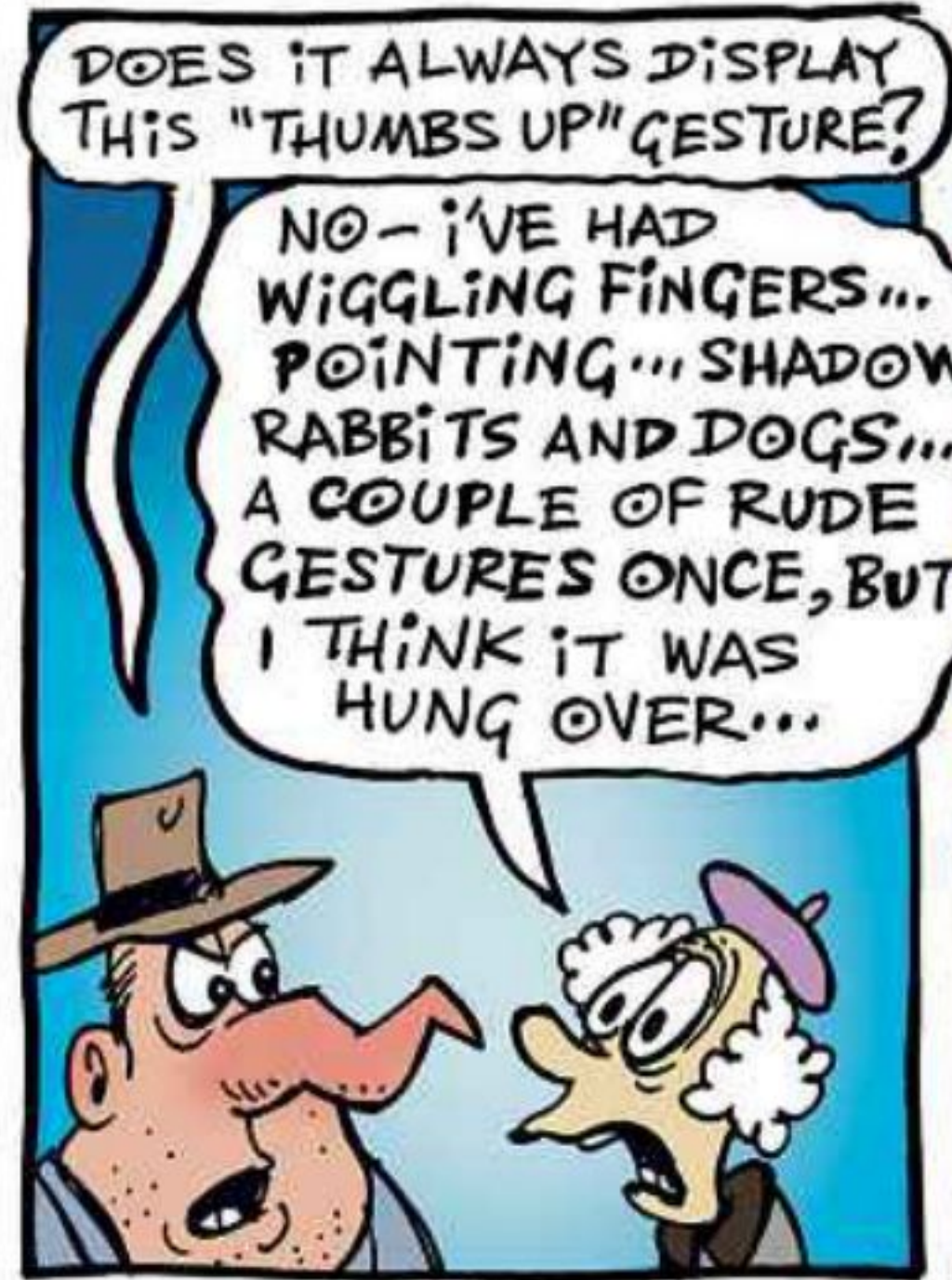
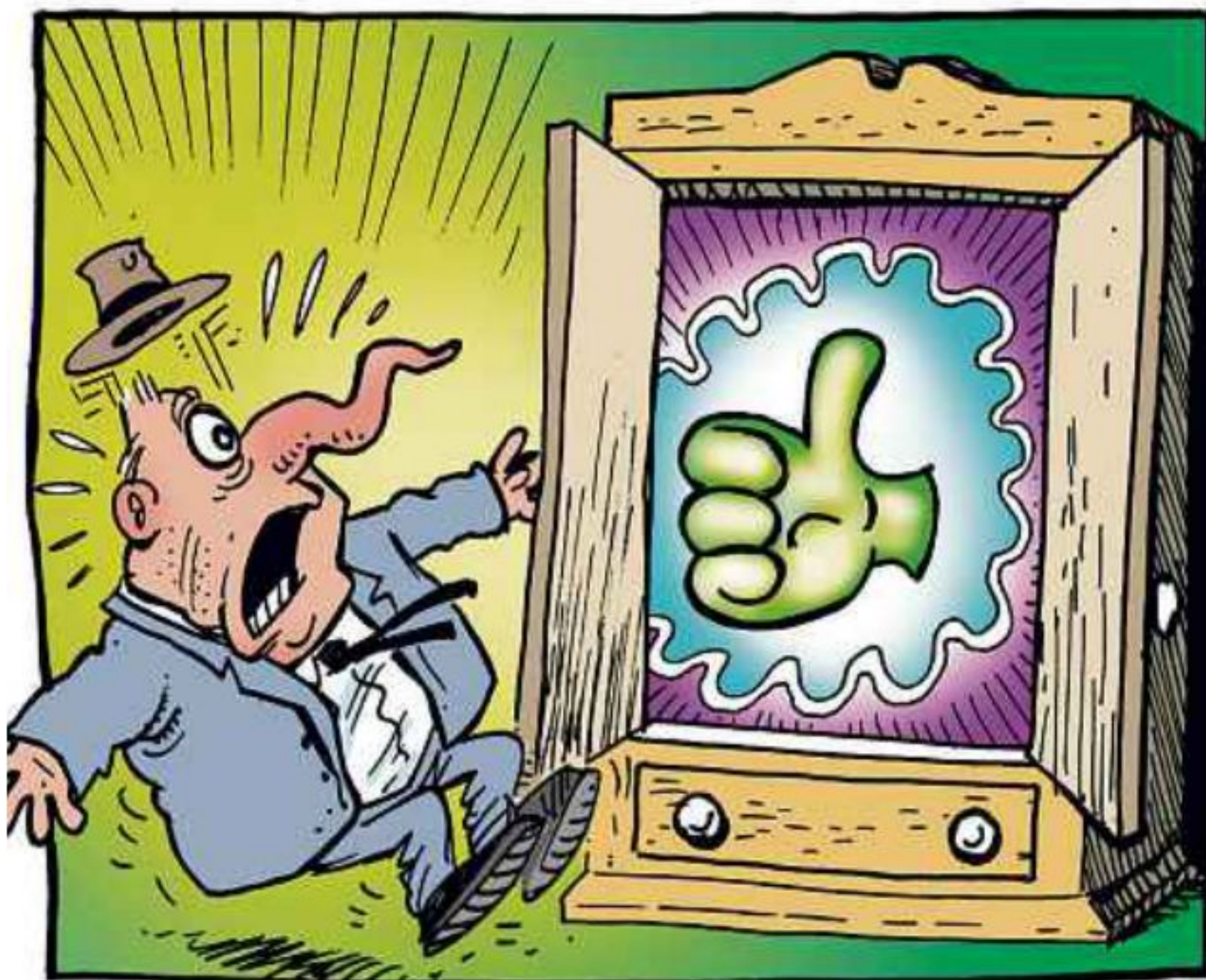
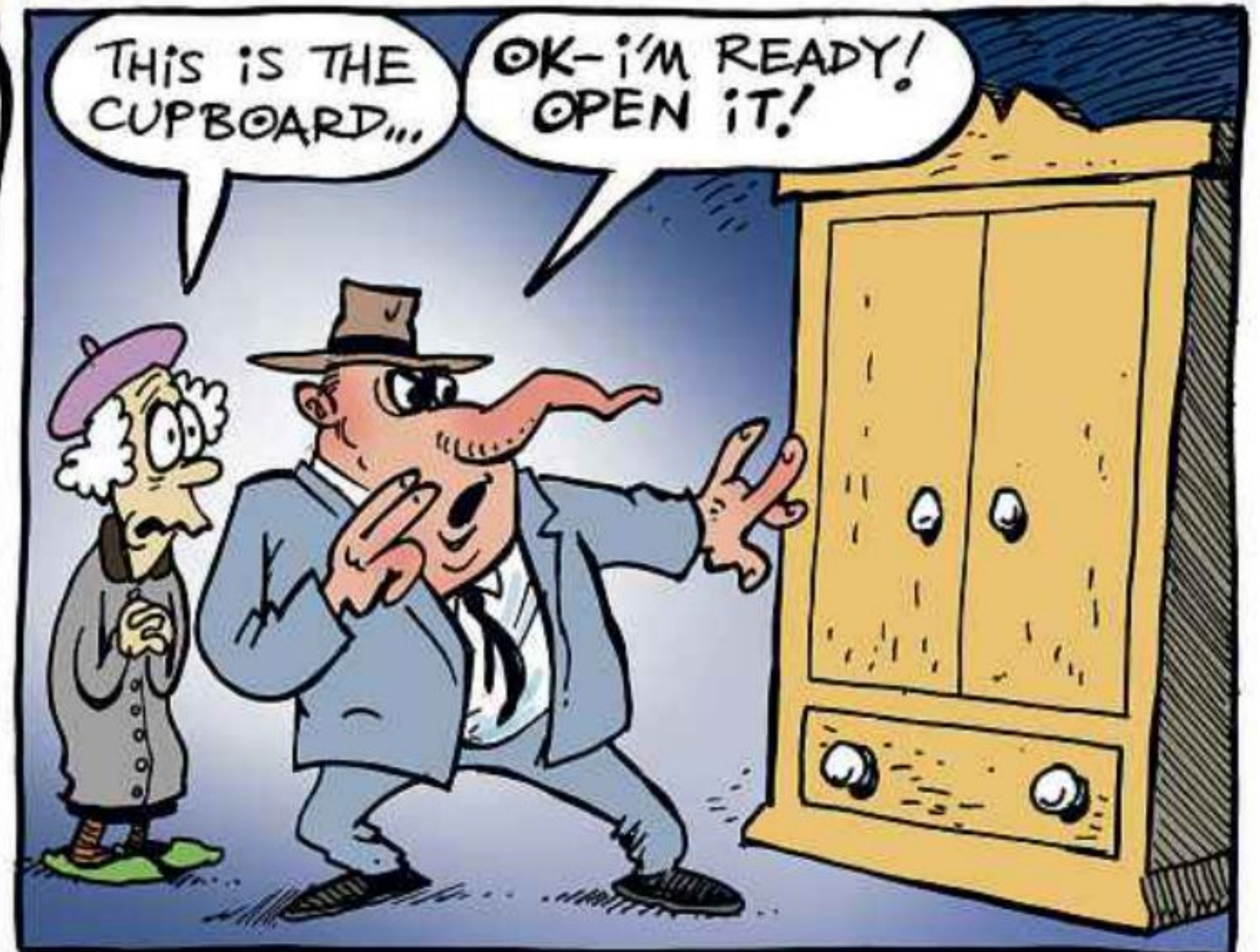
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PHENOMENOMIX

The Disembodied Hand

HUNT EMERSON



COMING NEXT MONTH



FAIRY FIELD TRIP

HUNTING FOR THE LITTLE
PEOPLE IN COUNTY GALWAY



WANDERING SPIRITS

GYPSY GHOST STORIES AND
TRAVELLERS' TALES



JESUS THE MAGICIAN,
PHANTOM PHONES,
WEREWOLF KIDS
AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 393

ON SALE 21 MAY 2020

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Michael Kosanovich, 21, died after being crushed by an unmanned car started by remote control. On 6 December 2019, the New York man was standing between two parked Lexus 2002 IS300s when one of them was started remotely by its owner, and rolled forward pinning Kosanovich between the two vehicles. Bystanders attempted to free him but the car rolled forward and crushed him again. Kosanovich was taken to hospital with severe trauma to the legs and torso and died of his injuries the next day.

According to the New York Police Department, at the time of the fatal accident, Kosanovich had been inspecting one of the vehicles as he intended to buy it. A spokeswoman for Toyota Motor North America said: "Our deepest sympathy goes out to the family and friends of Michael Kosanovich," adding that Lexus "did not offer a factory-installed remote start in the 2002 IS" model, suggesting that a remote ignition system would have had to be retrofitted. The system's instruction manual warns owners they should never remotely start the engine if "unaware of the circumstances surrounding the vehicle" as it could be dangerous for anyone in the car's vicinity. *BBC News, 12 Dec 2019.*

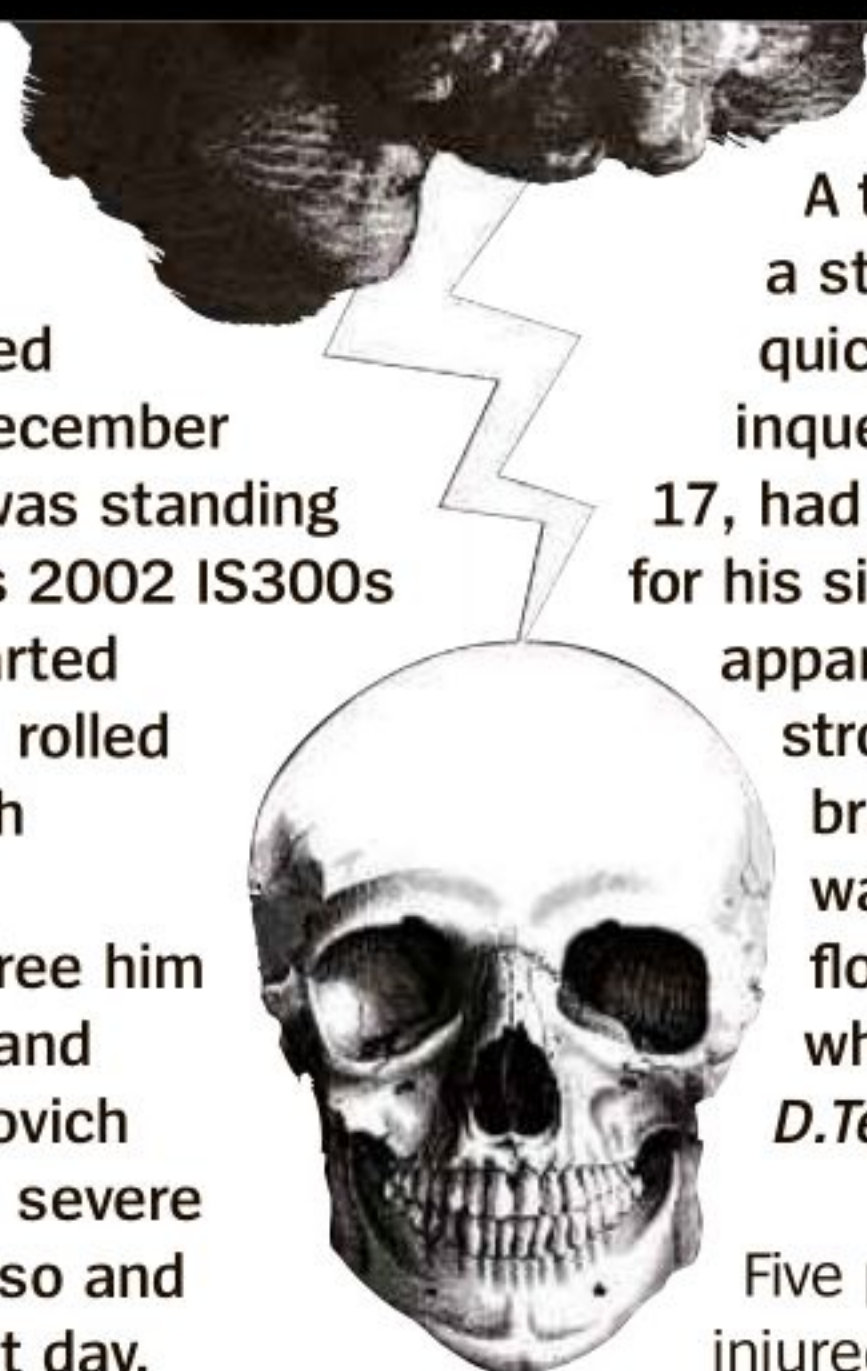
A vegan couple were charged with the murder of their 18-month-old son after he died of starvation, a Florida court heard. Ryan Patrick O'Leary, 30, and Sheila O'Leary, 35, of Cape Coral, told police they fed their child only raw fruits and vegetables. They called the emergency services on 27 September 2019 after they noticed he was unresponsive and had turned cold. Despite attempts at resuscitation, their son was pronounced dead, and was found to weigh only 17lb (8kg), about the healthy weight for a seven-month-old child. The couple had three other children, ages three, five, and 11, who were also adjudged to be victims of child abuse and extreme neglect. The three- and five-year-olds are now in care, while the 11-year-old was reunited with her biological father. The O'Learys were indicted by a grand jury on charges of first-degree murder, aggravated child abuse, aggravated manslaughter, child abuse, and two counts of child neglect. They could face the death penalty. *nbcnews.com, 19 Dec 2019.*

A teenage army cadet died from a stroke after turning his head too quickly while making dinner. An inquest heard that Ben Littlewood, 17, had been making sandwiches for his sister and himself, when he apparently suffered an ischemic stroke in which an artery to the brain tore due to neck injury. He was found lying on the kitchen floor and was taken to hospital where he died eight days later. *D.Telegraph, 6 Dec 2019.*

Five people died and six were injured when a heating pipe burst in a small Russian hotel, flooding its rooms with boiling water. All the victims, including a child, were guests at the nine-room hotel, situated in the basement of a residential building in Perm, near the Ural mountains. *D.Telegraph, 21 Jan 2020.*

A man was killed when a large metal plate crashed into his apartment at Torreforta, in Spain's autonomous Catalonia region. The one-ton object, which caused part of the building to collapse, had been launched by an explosion at a chemical plant 3km (two miles) away. A factory employee at the La Canonja site just south of Tarragona was also killed in the blast, and another worker subsequently died from injuries sustained during the incident, which occurred at 18.40 local time (17.40 GMT). Eyewitnesses told of seeing "a ball of fire" streak across the sky at the time of the blast, and saw a large object hit the building, causing damage to its exterior. Authorities say a chemical accident probably caused the explosion, which set off a huge fire at the Industrias Químicas del Óxido de Etileno plant, but that no toxic substances had been released. Local residents were initially told to stay indoors as dozens of firefighters worked through the night and the following day to control the blaze, spraying water over chemical tanks to keep them cool. The factory produces chemicals such as ethylene oxide, used to make antifreeze and pesticides, and propylene oxide, used to make plastics. Both are extremely flammable. *BBC News, 16 Jan 2020.*

A father and his nine-year-old daughter were shot by hunters when they were mistaken for deer during a New Year's Day hunt in Colleton County, South Carolina. *<i> 3 Jan 2020.*



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